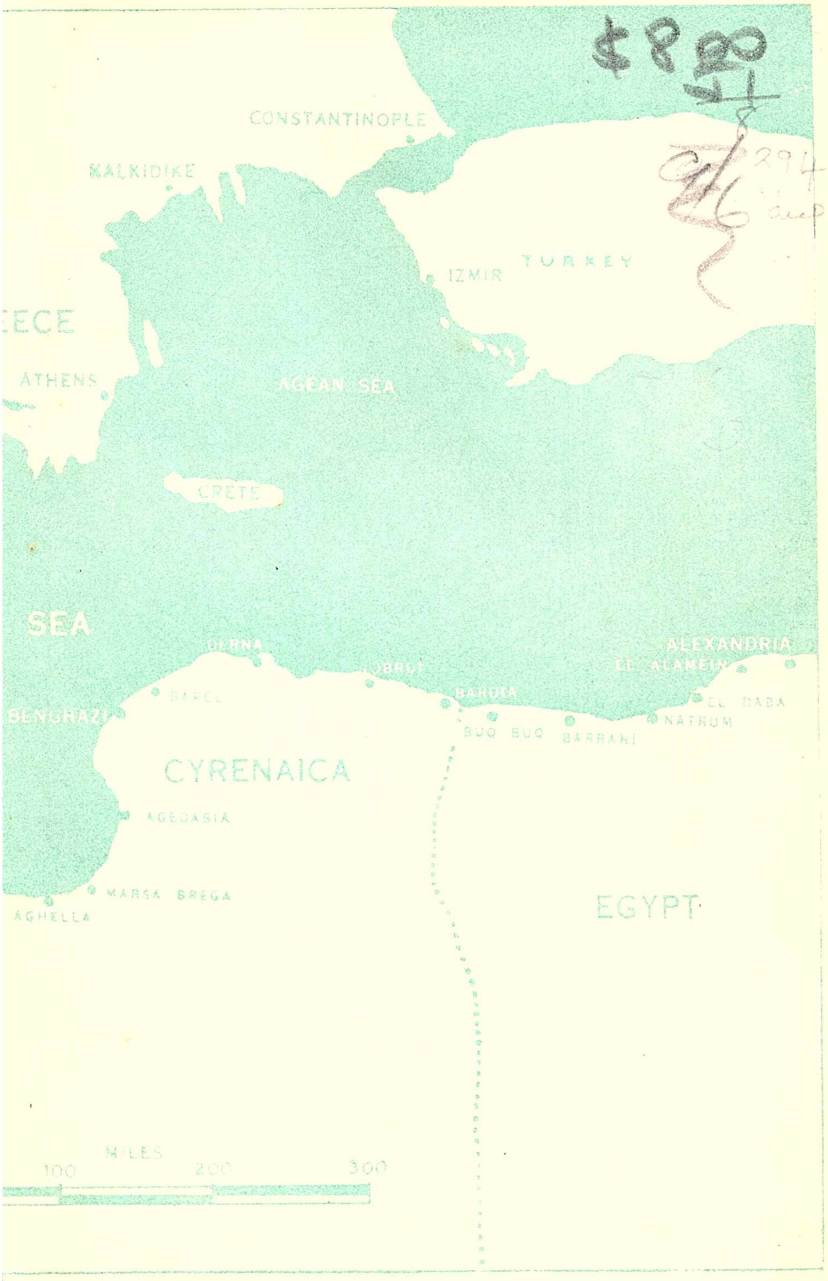
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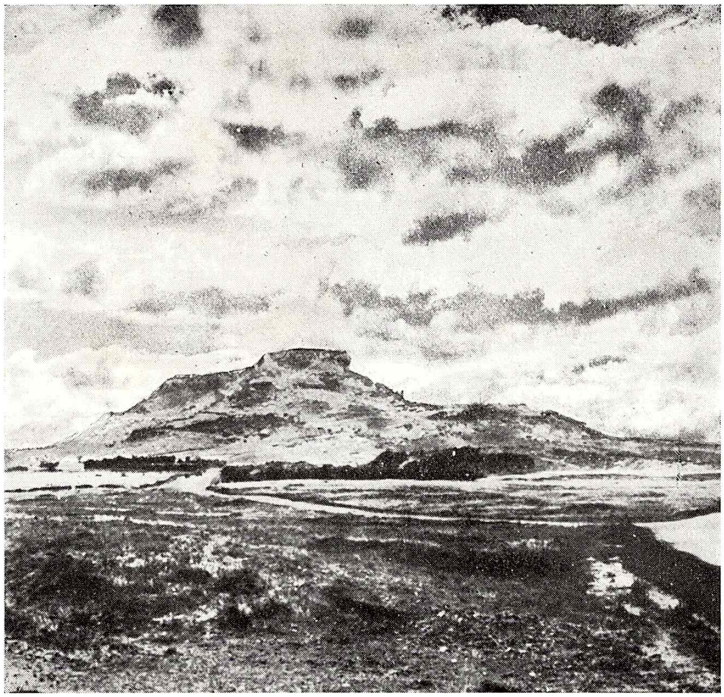

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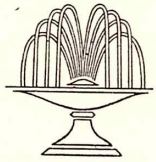
The forbidding Peak of Takrouna, Tunisia

TRIPOLI AND BEYOND

THE STORY OF A NEW ZEALAND ARTILLERYMAN WHO WENT THROUGH THE CAMPAIGN IN TUNISIA, AND WAS THEN ONE OF THOSE FORTUNATE KIWIS SENT HOME TO NEW ZEALAND WITH THE FIRST FURLOUGH DRAFT FROM THE MIDDLE EAST

by

FURNEAUX MARTYN



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FOREWORD

It is seldom, I suppose, that two writers link their names on the same book jacket when, in fact, only one did the writing.

I had nothing whatsoever to do with the writing of this book of Furneaux Martyn's but so closely upon the heels of my "Kiwi Saga" does it follow, in so similar a style is it written, and so ably does it finish what I started, that I felt I had to join with him and our publisher in submitting that our two books jointly cover the epic story of the New Zealanders in the desert campaigns.

MARTYN UREN

INTRODUCTION.

I will introduce myself to the reader. In September, 1939, just before my twenty-first birthday, I volunteered for service with the 2nd N.Z.E.F., and after three months' training in camp at Ngaruawahia left New Zealand's shores with the First Echelon. Our unit, the 4th Field Regiment, N.Z.A., travelled on the "Empress of Canada," which at that time hadn't been properly converted to a troopship, and she landed us safely at Suez on February 13th, 1940. I was then a member of a gun-crew, but later became a signaller through no wish of my own, and throughout the Greek Campaign was a telephone operator. After the battle of Penaeus Pass in Greece I was separated from my comrades and made my way down the country in company with other small parties of "strays," arriving on Crete a bit worse for wear. However, I was evacuated by the Hospital Ship "Aba" on her last trip from there, a few days before the Germans blitzed the island.

Back in Egypt I changed my job to that of O.P. Ack; in other words, an Artillery Observation Officer's Assistant. I liked this work, and held the post during the Libyan Campaign at Sidi Rezegh in 1941, and almost to the end of the fighting in North Africa.

In this book I have endeavoured to give the civilian reader an insight into the life of a soldier in action and also in those periods of rest between battles. No doubt those who were in Tunisia will find in many instances their experiences closely resembling mine as related here. I do not know whether my comrades would care for me to use their proper names, so to save them any embarrassment I have employed the nicknames by which they were commonly known amongst their fellow soldiers. A finer lot of friends I could never have wished for, and to those boys of my Troop with whom I shared the many dangers of the battlefront this book is dedicated.

F. M.

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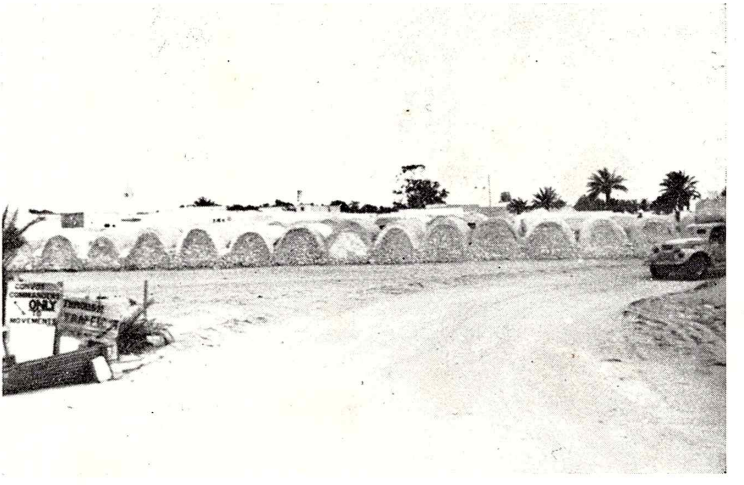
The Piazzo Castello: Tripoli



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Mud Hovels: Ben Gardane

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CHAPTER I

TRIPOLI

Tripoli fell on January 23rd, 1943. It was a great day for all of us, as we had chased the enemy right out of Egypt and Libya, and it meant the end of Mussolini's colonial empire. In the morning a bivouac area was allotted to our Regiment near the village of Suani Ben Adem, some fifteen miles from Tripoli, while the various other units of the Division were camped not far away. The 5th Field Regiment was only about a mile away and proved quite handy for visiting one's friends there. The tiny village, with its few white-washed buildings and surrounded by many kinds of trees, looked quite picturesque, and northwards through the centre ran the beautiful highway towards Tripoli. The Italians certainly knew how to construct roads and had spared no effort in an endeavour to make a success of their colonization of Tripolitania. In our " F " Troop area we were set well back from the main road, and while about half the personnel were in, or on the fringe of, an olive grove, the rest of us were dispersed on the sandy ground a short way from the shelter of the trees. Away from the cultivated parts where grain fields and fruit trees were a common sight, the country resembled pictures of shifting sands as seen in so

many movie films. Unlike the desert of Egypt it stretched away in the distance, a rippling sea of yellow sand dunes. I travelled as our Troop Commander's assistant, and together with a driver and a wireless operator we four were camped some two hundred yards from the olive trees, although we didn't do so badly with a nice level piece of ground covered with a very meagre growth of grass. Our Troop Commander, a man of solid build and very well known in New Zealand football and cricket circles, was one of the best, and the boys of the Troop had complete confidence in him as a leader. Dick, a little chap with a slightly turned-up nose was our driver, and Alan who hailed from Dunedin was our signaller. We had worked together for some considerable time, and even although I say it myself, we formed a very efficient team. It wasn't long before we settled down and while Dick, Alan, and the " Boss " slept in a large tent attached to the side of our vehicle, I dug a hole and erected my little " bivvy " tent over it. These bivouac tents were about seven feet long and were equipped with mosquito netting at both ends, so when put over a hole of the correct dimensions a very snug little nest resulted.

Up to the time of our arrival at Suani Ben Adem we had been doing truck cooking, but once we settled in, the battery cooks got on

the job again. We queued up for our meals in a little grassy glade where the cooks had established themselves, and after being served we sat down on the green banks and ate our food picnic fashion. Like the rest of the boys my appetite exceeded the ration issue, and it was no strange sight to see the cooking dishes being feverishly scraped by some of the hungrier ones in an effort to get some extra tit-bits. Our cooks excelled themselves in turning out first-class meals and in addition constructed an oven out of a couple of empty forty-gallon petrol drums. It was seldom indeed that men of that calling went to so much trouble and we certainly appreciated it.

When pay-day came along we were paid in British Military Authority notes and they ranged in denomination from a shilling to a pound. It was occupation money and legal tender in Libya. The notes were of quite good paper, but after continual handling during gambling games they were inclined to tear where a silver thread ran through them. Those of the half-crown value were always the first to come to pieces. Officially all gambling was forbidden but the popular game of two-up was played every evening well out of sight of those in authority. Later on some of us started off a horse-racing game, it being sanctioned and even played by some officers,

and "Den," "Hook," and myself were the "Clerks of the Course." The game proved very popular and attracted quite a number of "race-goers" from the different troops, and on our best day we handled over forty pounds. The "Course" was a large board six feet by three which was marked out in six lanes, and those in turn were each divided into about thirty squares, some of which represented obstacles. If a horse landed on a square which perhaps signified a "hurdle" it would have to go back three or four spaces, and a water-jump meant a heavier penalty still. The six "horses" were named after the symbols on a crown and anchor dice which was rolled to decide which "horse" was going to make a run. Then a pack of cards, from which everything above eight was removed, was cut, and the number of pips on the face card denoted how many squares the particular "horse" had to go forward. There were some very close finishes at times and the boys got quite a kick out of it. However we couldn't play "races" all the time, so to keep us fit a base-ball pitch was levelled off in the sand, but even then we only had one game on it. I remember that game very well as I was first-base fielder when Mark, a good friend of mine, was batting. He didn't hit the ball far and consequently had to make a dive for the base, and in so doing broke

his thumb by catching it in the sand-bag marker as he fell. It was an unfortunate accident, but at least he knew that the war was over for him temporarily.

On Thursday, February 4th, we had a big day, when Alan, Dick, and I cleaned the truck out thoroughly and then removed the detachable canvas hood. All the spit and polish was in preparation for a ceremonial parade and an inspection by Winston Churchill who had flown to Tripoli. When all was ready, our regiment moved out in column of route and proceeded to the other side of Suani where an area had been cleared for the occasion. We had a practice parade and march past and then returned to an assembly area for lunch. At two in the afternoon the British Prime Minister arrived, and then, in company with General Montgomery, made a tour of inspection of the New Zealand Division by car. Alongside the General with his brown sun-tanned features, Mr. Churchill looked a real "pale-face" but of course he had just come from the middle of an English winter. Being tall I was on the right flank of our battery line consequently seeing the great man at fairly close quarters and distinctly hearing him say to General Montgomery; "These are soldiers." That was praise enough for any troops. After a short speech by Mr. Churchill we marched

past on foot, and shortly afterwards rumbled past him with our vehicles in line, and behind us came the 5th Regiment, then the 6th, and so on until all units had passed the saluting base. It was an impressive sight and movie cameramen were busy recording the scene. We then returned to our camp at Suani and there was a noticeable lack of grumbling usually attached to a ceremonial parade. Maybe Winston Churchill didn't have anything to do with it, but a couple of days later I was promoted to a full bombardier!!

A week later the majority of us went in to a camp a mile or two out of Tripoli, and there Alan and I dug a good deep hole (air raids were inclined to be rather frequent over the town) and put our little bivouac tent over it, firmly anchoring one of the guy ropes to a near-by palm tree. About a chain from the door of our " bivvy " was a garden containing beans and carrots, and as it seemed to belong to nobody in particular we helped ourselves. The young tender carrots were delicious and I ate them by the dozen. We were stationed there so as to be handy for the job of unloading stores and equipment from the merchant ships in Tripoli harbour. There were no wharves available for unloading the stuff, so it all had to be manhandled and brought ashore in lighters. That job lasted a fortnight and despite

the fact that we worked under adverse conditions many times, such as wind and rain in the middle of the night and occasional air raids, the ships were still unloaded. The work we liked most was the unloading of foodstuffs which were largely American, when being only human and Kiwis at that, we did very well for ourselves regarding food and drink. There was an excellent brand of grape-juice which seemed to be a particular favourite and of course tinned fruit was always welcome. The more uninteresting and tiring work was the handling of motor fuels and ammunition, as we couldn't very well drink petrol or oil and a 500lb bomb didn't seem at all appetizing. Sometimes we were working in the holds of the vessels out in the harbour and sometimes unloading from the barges on to the dockside. Without the Red-caps common to the docks, where they snooped round to make sure we were "good little boys," the job on board ship was much more congenial. However, despite a certain amount of "war wastage" we, the N.Z. Division, stepped up the unloading rate to something like 2000 tons a day.

The dock area on the Spanish Mole which formed the western side of the harbour was badly battered by the accurate bombing of the R.A.F., and in many places only the blackened ruins of buildings and warehouses remained,

To make the destruction more complete the Germans had blown a gap in the mole itself, but it wasn't long before our engineers had it filled in and made passable for wheeled traffic. The New Zealand Engineers enlisted the help of some stalwart men from the Maori Battalion and those great workers soon had the job done. Many enemy ships were sunk in the harbour the majority being small cargo schooners, although one or two larger boats were grounded and lay half submerged. Despite the fact that she had a huge hole in her port side that a car could have been driven through, a rather speedy looking Italian liner still remained afloat. Apparently a British submarine had caught her in the Mediterranean and a well-aimed torpedo had done the trick. Around the harbour was a cordon of barrage balloons which were in the air both day and night to prevent low-level bombing attacks on our ships anchored there. One day a real storm developed, the gale being too strong to permit the reeling in of their anchoring cables, and one by one the balloons broke adrift. Rapidly they rose higher and higher until the pressure inside was too great and the envelopes burst, bits and pieces flying everywhere in the strong wind and slowly coming to earth. A lot of the silver gas-bags were lost that day only one surviving the storm.

We went on duty at all sorts of hours both day and night, and I remember one particular occasion when our party was going on shift just before dawn. It was still dark when we arrived at the docks and then the air-raid warning was sounded. I don't know where the enemy 'planes were, but the anti-aircraft barrage above the harbour was terrific and out-did any Guy Fawkes celebrations within my memory. The din was awful as Bofors guns pumped away shells as fast as they could, and further back we could hear the deeper bark of the heavy Ack Ack as they too joined in. The white fingers of the many searchlights probed the inky black sky which was alive with streaks of red tracer and pin-point flashes of yellow light as the shells exploded high in the air. There is an old saying that " what goes up must come down," and soon fragments from the bursting Ack Ack shells were dropping like hail. I had left my " battle bowler," otherwise my tin hat, behind at the camp and consequently felt a bit naked. A nearby Jeep offered a passable substitute, so I scrambled under the small vehicle and sheltered there for the duration of the " hailstorm." At the opening of the barrage the boys had scattered like chaff in a wind, but once the guns ceased firing, they began to drift back and soon our full complement was present. Raids used to

be quite frequent, and one night a German 'plane came in from the south, and after making a hit and run raid on the town, went for its life out to sea. One bomb dropped in the centre of the town, one on an English Casualty Clearing Station, and the other just missed two anti-aircraft guns on the waterfront, buckling the main road as though there had been an earthquake. Those boys from the New Zealand Anti-aircraft Regiment were blown flat by the blast, but luckily enough there were no casualties as the bomb dropped on to the beach below the level of the pavement on which their guns were situated. If it had landed a matter of ten yards shorter, both Kiwi gun-crews would have suffered heavily. The C. C.S., was absolutely wrecked, and as a couple of ambulance drivers were buried under the debris, we were relieved from our job at the docks and set to work to dig them out. A Kiwi infantry unit later took over from us and we learnt afterwards that the two Tommies had come out alive and unhurt. It seemed incredible, but they had been sleeping in their ambulance parked underneath a stone archway which had held when the building collapsed on top of it. It was certainly an advertisement for Italian architecture!!

When off duty from my "wharfie" job I occasionally went into Tripoli, either with Alan

or some of the other boys. We had a good look all over the town and into the few shops that were open for business and offering their poor selection of wares for sale. The town was quite well laid out with its broad streets and fine buildings, but on the western side was the old native quarter which had been preserved almost intact to provide an attraction for tourists in pre-war days. The modern part of Tripoli was very pretty in places especially down by the waterfront, where the main road along the shore, the Lungo Mare, was lined with beautiful palm trees. Although most of the buildings were pock-marked by bomb splinters only one or two were completely demolished by direct hits, the R.A.F., being most careful when they had bombed the wharves and other military targets. Some of the buildings had painted on them the words; *Il Duce Vincere* and *Il Fuehrer Vincere,* but Mussolini's prospects of making a conquest didn't appear any too good. The main square, Piazzo Castello, was a very busy place, as all roads led into it and all the traffic to and from the docks passed through there. Overlooking the Piazzo was an old Spanish castle renovated by the Italians, and at the top of the flagpole surmounting that edifice, the Union Jack flew proudly in the breeze. Perhaps the Italians should have painted *Inglisi Vincere* on their

buildings. There wasn't a great deal to do in Tripoli except to go sight-seeing and the native quarters were out of bounds, but an English Entertainment Unit put on free pictures daily in an old Italian theatre. With so many troops on leave it was a matter of getting in the queue early or missing the performance. Alan and I also saw a show there put on by the Kiwi Concert Party, and as there were some Scottish items on the programme it appealed greatly to the " Scotties " of the 51st Highland Division which was camped near Tripoli. The New Zealand Y.M.C.A., took over quite a large building where free tea and biscuits were obtainable, and that was a great boon as meals were unprocurable anywhere. The main eatables available were unsatisfying dates, sweets, and peanuts, although fresh vegetables could be bought at the local produce markets. It was a common sight to see a Kiwi loaded down with a sack full of greens when returning to camp after his day's leave. Most commodities were very scarce but there was no shortage of the local Italian wine, popularly called "plonk." It was extremely bitter stuff and keeping it in former petrol containers didn't improve the taste any. In order to make it palatable the boys put fruit juice or sugar into it and then proceeded to drink the stuff in large quantities, with disastrous results. I couldn't acquire the

taste for it myself so signed a temporary pledge and drank tea and water. It was always obvious the " morning after " who had been on the plonk the " night before," as their lips and teeth were stained a deep purple and a " hang-over " was very evident. The Italian colonists were simply horrified to see the way their nice table wine went down the Kiwi's throats, but when a New Zealander has a drink he doesn't waste valuable time in sipping it!!

Our job completed in Tripoli harbour we returned to the camp at Suani Ben Adem where part-time training was commenced. At the end of our stay there the guns went out into the open country beyond the village of El Azizia for predicted shooting practice, in the form of concentrating many guns to fire simultaneously on the same target. As there was no work for me to do I just went along for the ride, and Dick and I sat on the top of a small hill and watched the effect of the shelling. Later in the day we moved back to Suani, packed everything on our vehicles and finally lined up in readiness for the long trek that night. All doubt as to our future operations was dispelled, and it was obvious that we were to take part in the final phase of the battle against the Axis forces in North Africa.

CHAPTER II

INTO TUNISIA

At 10 p.m. on Monday, March 1st, we moved out on to the main road north in column of route and started on our journey towards Tunisia. My feelings were mixed and though I am speaking from my own point of view, I am sure many others felt as I did at the time. We had done a lot of fighting while chasing the enemy for something approaching 2,000 miles and were getting tired of it all, but in our heart of hearts I think most of us had some desire to see the thing through and finish it once and for all. After all we had been given a job to do, so it was up to us to see that our share was done properly.

We travelled west all night with Dick driving and led the troop in our armoured car (R.F.) It was a wearisome journey and a ticklish job driving without lights, especially as there was a certain amount of traffic going the other way. Once while rounding a corner, we nearly got rammed by a huge tank-transporter but Dick gave the wheel a quick wrench and we averted a collision by a matter of inches. The parentage of the transporter driver became extremely doubtful, and I'm afraid the language which followed would never be accepted in a ladies' drawing-room.

It was a relief when dawn broke and we no longer proceeded on our way with our hearts in our mouths. Early in the morning we had a long enough halt to boil the billy and grab something to eat, and shortly afterwards when we moved off again, one of the trucks ahead of us which had pulled too far off the side of the road, struck a stray mine and blew up. Only one man was wounded and as it was a very light vehicle it was amazing that all the occupants hadn't been killed. Dick was very tired after his night's ordeal at the wheel of our car so I took over and drove for the rest of that day. An hour or two after our little snack on the roadside we passed through Pisida, a small coastal village which marked the boundary line between Tripolitania and Tunisia. From there on we struck a very rough stretch of road on which some South African blacks of a pioneer company were working, and our scout car creaked and groaned as it bumped merrily over the deep ruts. Although not used in the firing zones those black troops did sterling work behind the lines and released many valuable men for the forward areas. Soon a few natives wandering along the roadside denoted that an inhabited locality was not far distant, and by noon we reached the village of Ben Gardane where many of the hovels were well plastered with the familiar "HD" sign.

That was the sign of the well-known 51st Highland Division, and so fond were the "Scotties" of leaving their trade-mark wherever they went, they earned for themselves the appropriate nickname of "Highway Decorators." However, that didn't detract from their first-class fighting qualities. Ben Gardane was just another of the common native villages dotting the countryside, although the French influence was a change after we had become accustomed to the Italian colonists' ideas. When one sees a photograph of a native village it all looks very nice but doesn't show the filth that lies around the place, and perhaps it is just as well as the whole effect would be spoilt. Ben Gardane was no exception to the rule of dirty villages, but when viewed from a distance its white-washed, mud-brick "houses" (if one could call them that) made it appear quite picturesque.

The country beyond Ben Gardane took on a more pleasing aspect as there were many groves of trees, mostly olives, and in general the scenery was much more refreshing. We had lunch alongside the road beyond the village and then moved on again, passing various workshop units and numerous supply dumps effectively camouflaged under the spreading branches of the trees. All along the road were various signs warning drivers to be careful

and some of them were very humourous. The first one had the words " Confucius him say " on it and the following boards had a series of cleverly thought out proverbs on them. I don't remember the exact words, but one of them read something like " Easy get new driver, vehicle difficult to replace." It was late afternoon when we reached Medenine which had been badly knocked about by the bombing of the R.A.F. and also by shelling from both sides. To make sure there was nothing left of value and to hinder the advance of the Eighth Army as much as possible, the Germans had carried out demolition work and sown mines at random through and around the town. A favourite place for laying their mines was amongst the groves of palm trees where our vehicles would naturally take cover from enemy aircraft or observation posts. It was in one of those places that the Commanding Officer of our regiment became a casualty while reconnoitring in his jeep. It was a miracle he wasn't killed when the mine exploded under the tiny vehicle, but he sustained quite a severe injury to his leg. Shortly after our arrival at Medenine we went out in RF to look for suitable sites for our guns and later led them to the area decided upon. " F " Troop's position was a good one and our four guns were dispersed in a small orchard which served to conceal us from enemy obser-

vation. When darkness fell a very strict blackout had to be observed as the country was flat all the way to the foothills held by the enemy, and any light would have been easily seen. I was on prowler guard around the guns for an hour and a half in the middle of the night, and after wakening the next in turn after the completion of my shift, I climbed quickly into my blankets as it was bitterly cold.

The next morning at dawn we went out in RF beyond the forward infantry lines but nothing was to be seen from there, and later we were recalled as our 26th Battery was to take up a new position near Medenine. The guns moved into a small valley about half a mile from the town and the only possible chance the enemy had of spotting them was from the air. It was very stony ground where the troop was situated, but some grass and trees, although devoid of fruit at that time of the year, made it a pleasant little spot. In accordance with the new position we went out beyond Metameur, another deserted village some three miles further west, and there established our OP (observation post) at Point 185 on the lower slopes of the Tadjera Khir feature. That hill, over 500 feet high, was the highest point for miles around, and an excellent view of the surrounding country could be obtained even from the lower portion.

During the day our signallers got busy and laid a telephone line to us from the guns, and that gave Alan who had been on the wireless almost continuously, a much needed spell. In keeping watch from this OP we were seeing a different type of country to the usual landscape of interminable sandy wastes. The green plain stretched away in front of us dotted here and there with little thatched hovels, untenanted of course, and the fields of grain in the distance resembled a patchwork quilt. Down below us and not far away were the machine-guns and anti-tank guns of the Guards Brigade entrenched in an olive grove, while away on our right were the " Scotties " who likewise had trees for cover. In the clear air we could see for miles, and a long way off to the north-east a glimpse of the blue sea could be caught, while on the other hand, straight out in front to the west lay the high range of the Matmata hills, their lower slopes undefined in the haze of distance. This splendid view was occasionally marred by clouds of dirty grey smoke drifting across it as shells burst among the forward British elements. They weren't exactly in a position to admire the scenery either. Our own little spot was very quiet except for a couple of shells that whistled over our heads and burst on the top of the hill behind us. The enemy were en-

deavouring to destroy the little white block-house which stood on the summit of Tadjera Khir. We remained at the OP at night and slept close by, as an intelligence report had come through stating that the Germans were expected to launch an attack before long.

The next two days were spent at the OP watching and waiting for something to happen, but the only noticeable difference in the state of affairs was an increase in air activity. Sneak raids were carried out by the Germans, their 'planes dropping bombs more or less haphazardly and then taking the shortest route back over their own lines. During one of the raids I saw a Messerschmitt fighter get in the way of a Bofors ack ack shell, with disastrous results for the Hun. It was with much pleasure that I watched the 'plane disintegrate in mid-air, and although the pilot was killed instantly, his parachute somehow opened and he came floating down to earth amid the debris. I may sound a bit callous to some readers, but after the punishment we had taken from the Luftwaffe especially in Greece, we derived much satisfaction out of seeing them knocked from the sky. There was a Spitfire 'drome just out of Medenine and from there we were provided with an excellent fighter cover, the distance to the enemy's lines being only a matter of fifteen to twenty miles. In combat

the British pilots were more than a match for the Germans, and in addition, our fighter-bombers frequently went across to bomb and strafe enemy gun positions and motor transport.

One morning a relief party came out from " F " Troop and took over the OP, so we went in to the gun position and had the day off. I had a real clean up and got rid of my whiskers after giving my razor the go-by for two or three days, and I didn't feel so grubby when that was done. Next on the list was a bath, so I heated some water in a cut-down petrol tin, soaped myself all over, and then upended the container on top of my head. Not exactly the way one would have a bath in civilisation, but quite effective. It was great to have a spell even though it was only for a day, as my eyes were beginning to feel the strain of continually looking over the countryside through field-glasses. Our " Boss," the Troop Commander, and the rest of us on RF, had an easy time until well on in the afternoon when we returned to Point 185 and took over once again. That night, before turning in for some sleep, we were once again warned by regimental head-quarters that an attack was imminent but we were inclined to treat it lightly. We should have taken more notice perhaps, but the previous warning had come to nought and we

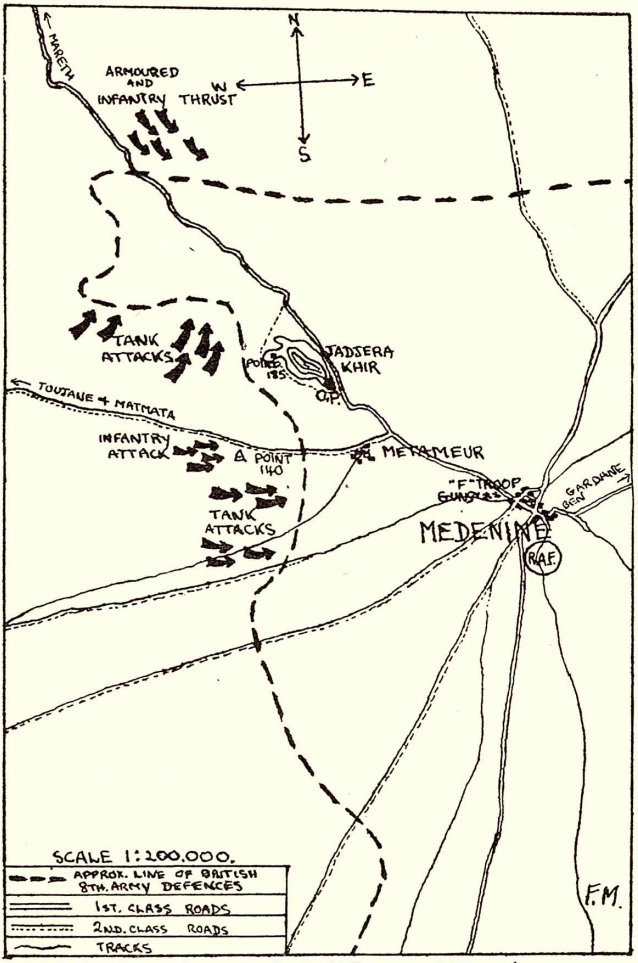
had been lulled into a false sense of security. However, it was extremely unlikely that the Germans would attack at night, and if anything untoward happened during the hours of darkness, our telephone was always alongside us.

CHAPTER III

THE BATTLE OF MEDENINE.

When the early morning mists lifted in the grey dawn of March 6th, an amazing spectacle met my eyes. The previous night's warning had been the " dinkum oil " alright, and moving towards us in formation across the plain from the Matmata hill, were dozens of heavy German tanks, the leading ones being only about 4,000 yards away. Through field-glasses they made an impressive sight with churning clouds of dust streaming out behind them, but we couldn't stop to admire them from our exposed position on Point 185. The news was quickly flashed back to the guns, and we then hurriedly packed our truck and moved to a new OP which had been previously reconnoitred on the southern side of Tadjera Khir. To reach the spot we had to scale the almost perpendicular face of the feature, but once up there commanded a marvellous view of the whole plain.

It wasn't long before many guns were barking and the battle was on! As soon as the enemy came within range we opened fire, but moving tanks are a big order for field guns at 7,000 yards range, and we could only shell the general area and hope for the best. Soon the British mediums behind us joined in the fray, and began to use shrapnel against the



DISPOSITIONS OF THE FORCES: MARCH 6TH.

lightly armoured vehicles which the Germans brought up behind their first waves of tanks. Then the German Mark IIIs and IVs split up into two groups, one formation advancing on the Guards Brigade, and the other turning towards the village of Metameur which was on the New Zealand Division's front. This little place was a typical native village situated on a knoll, and in the centre was a tall minaret which, so the enemy thought, was being used as an OP. Accordingly he methodically proceeded to reduce the place to ruins, but despite the fact that at times the village was obscured by the smoke of bursting shells, the minaret remained standing throughout the battle. The thrust towards Metameur got very close indeed, but after four of their tanks had been knocked out in as many minutes by six-pounder anti-tank guns, the Germans decided that things were getting a bit too warm and began to withdraw. While they were moving back our Troop Commander, who had the range to a nicety, ordered gunfire on the retreating tanks and suddenly yelled out; "I've got one!" I've never seen a man more excited than he was at that moment, and it certainly looked as though he could claim the credit for either a Mark III or IV. A direct hit by one of our shells on an enemy vehicle had set its petrol on fire, and through field-glasses it looked exactly like a

tank burning. Bright orange flames were leaping from it and thick black clouds of oily smoke drifted slowly up into the air. We knew that it was one of our shells which had done the damage, as ours were the only guns firing on that particular target at the time. However, we were to be disappointed later on when going out to have a look at our "tank," as it turned out to be only a British bren carrier which the Germans had been using. Our shell had made an enormous hole in the side of the carrier, and that was one less armoured vehicle the enemy possessed.

That morning the Guards Brigade, which was made up of the Scots, Coldstream and Grenadier Regiments, acquitted itself very well, the score being over a dozen tanks knocked out and its own casualties not numerous. The German Tenth Panzer Division was getting badly mauled, but wasn't prepared to call it a day at that stage. During the previous night the Germans had moved their artillery forward to support their armour, so began to bombard the summit of Tadjera Khir where some of our artillery observers were dug in. Our own little eyrie however, was some hundreds of yards from the top of the hill, and apart from occasional splinters, we were quite safe. The British medium guns behind us were pounding away almost incessantly, their line of

fire directly over our heads, so it was no wonder I developed a splitting headache from the terrific cracking all day. Still it was better to put up with that and hear the shells whistling on their way to the enemy, than to have his guns directed at us.

On finding that he could get nowhere with his tank attacks which were proving too costly for him, the enemy retired to re-group his forces and have a breather. Suddenly we noticed considerable activity in several small wadis away out in front of us. What was he up to now? We weren't left long in doubt and it was soon obvious that the Germans were preparing for another assault, this time with infantry. It wasn't long before the first wave topped a rise and began advancing across the plain in open order. More and more strung-out lines of men came into view until the force moving towards us appeared to be about a battalion strong. They presented a wonderful target and our guns lost no time in making themselves felt. Maybe the enemy under-estimated the fire-power of the British artillery, but it was sheer suicide to advance in the open as he did, and the bursting shells wrought terrible havoc amongst the German infantry. They were brave men those, to move forward under such a terrific hail of shells, and that sort of thing was foreign to the Italians.

In all, about two hundred guns were firing on them with deadly effect, so it was no wonder they were brought to a standstill and forced to dig in as best they could. It was amazing that they got as far as Point 140 which was only about 3,000 yards from their objective, the the Tadjera Khir feature. We learnt later that they had orders to take the hill at all costs, but such a concentration of fire as they were under, was more than flesh and blood could stand. The German Commander was supposed to have issued an order of the day which implied, that if Tadjera Khir wasn't taken so as to give command of the plains to the south and east, the days of the Axis forces in North Africa were numbered. Never did an enemy general make a more truthful statement!

During the afternoon we were introduced rather rudely to a new German weapon. This was a Nebelwerfer or six-barrelled mortar, which could throw half a dozen 150 lb. shells into the air in about a quarter of a minute. To begin with, the enemy mounted two of these nasty bits of work on a road some 4,000 yards away, proceeding to lob the projectiles behind us, and the noise was like many Stukas screaming down on their targets. Apparently he was doing his level best to knock us off our OP ridge, and although some of the shells came too close for comfort, he just couldn't get our

exact range. To give some idea of the noise created, the boys back at the guns about four miles away said they could hear the projectiles whining through the air on their mission of destruction. At the time we didn't know what sort of a gun the enemy was using, but I swore I could see the shells dropping. The " Boss " just looked at me doubtfully, thinking I must have got a touch of the sun and was seeing things. Some minutes later however, Bill, our telephone operator, also saw a couple falling behind us, and so corroborated my seemingly fanciful statement. It was then that the Troop Commander saw where the Germans were firing from, and in no time at all, had "F" Troop's guns dropping shells right amongst them, forcing them to quickly vacate that rather unhealthy spot. These Nebelwerfers were easily spotted when firing, as they gave off a big cloud of blue smoke and the terrific flashes of flame from the barrels could be seen for miles, but that was definitely the only good thing about them.

Air activity was greatly increased during that day of battle, and even some Stuka dive-bombers made their appearance after a prolonged absence. It was just after one of the infrequent Stuka raids that I watched a couple of our fighters pick off one of these aircraft from the tail of a German formation, and it

was pretty to see. The first Spitfire somehow missed him but the second made no mistake, and after two short bursts of machine-gun fire a big piece flew off the Stuka and the crew of two lost no time in bailing out. Unfortunately for one of them, his parachute failed to open, and he turned over and over in the air before hitting the ground at a terrific speed. Our medium bombers were also on the job in close support, both Bostons and Mitchells, and it was with much satisfaction that we watched their very effective pattern bombing. It was great to see the " inexorable eighteen " (named so by the Germans) go across regularly to drop their loads of destruction on enemy concentrations. Although no damage was done, we in the OP were extremely annoyed when some R.A.F., fighter-bombers screamed down on us and laid their " eggs " at the foot of the hill. Our opinion of the R.A.F., was very definitely unfavourable at that moment, and the telephone wires were soon buzzing, conveying that fact to the appropriate quarters. After all, the feature had been in British hands for some considerable time, and they should have had some idea of the dispositions of the forces. However, mistakes will occur, and some poor chap probably got a rap over the knuckles for it. One of their bombs landed very close to our maintenance signallers' truck, but luckily

it was a dud and failed to explode, although it gave the boys a terrific fright. Perhaps to compensate somewhat for that misplaced attack, we used to get a certain amount of amusement out of watching the R.A.F., on their landing ground near Medenine. This Spitfire 'drome was within reach of a couple of German long-range guns situated in the Matmata hills, and every now and then they lobbed a few big shells in the vicinity of the aircraft on the ground. It looked as though a hornet's nest had been disturbed, with all the pilots running to their machines and getting into the air as quickly as they could. We got quite a laugh out of it, but I don't suppose the airmen saw the funny side of it, and the ground staff wouldn't think it much of a joke to be filling in shell craters all the time. However it certainly said something for our air cover when it was established within range of the enemy's guns, and we fully appreciated the grand job the Air Force was doing.

In the evening things had quietened down appreciably as the enemy infantry had been halted and forced to dig in, and their remaining tanks weren't inclined to be too agressive. Just at dusk however, their armour made another tentative thrust on the left flank of the Medenine defences, but as before, it was successfully repulsed. In the gathering dark-

ness visibility fell to zero, and all that could be seen out in front were a few enemy tanks burning, and also some of the thatches on native huts blazing away merrily, having been set on fire by tracer or incendiary bullets. When it got properly dark, the " Boss " decided that he and a signaller would sleep up at the OP on top of the ridge in case anything should happen during the night, while Dick, Alan, and I could bed down alongside RF. Accordingly we carried their two blanket rolls to the summit, and I was blowing like an engine under a full head of steam when I got there. The face of the hill was some climb and stones rolling from under our feet didn't make the ascent any easier. It had been a tiring day, and it was with much relief that I at last climbed into my blankets and dropped off to sleep.

Next morning there was a thick blanket of white fog over the whole plain, and at times the wind swirled the mist up around our ridge, making things very damp and chilly. This was an excellent natural screen made to order for the enemy, and it effectively concealed any movements he chose to make. The fog took some time to dissipate and it wasn't until well on in the morning that it cleared sufficiently to enable us to look out across the scene of the previous day's battle. We had half expected

the Germans to make another thrust under cover of the heavy mist, but soon saw that we were mistaken and that he was withdrawing to the Matmata hills whence he had launched his abortive assault. Apparently Jerry had had enough of the Eighth Army! With no danger of further attack we went forward to our old OP on Point 185, and from there watched the enemy slowly moving back. It was a pity he was out of range of our guns, but the medium artillery, being able to shoot much further than our 25 pounders, occasionally shelled the German transport and generally kept them on the move. What a sight the battlefield presented! The blackened shells of burnt-out tanks lay strewn everywhere, and in some cases the turrets were blown clean off them. March 6th had been a great day for the Eighth Army, a complete victory, as altogether fifty-two enemy tanks, Mark IIIs and IVs, and Specials of both types, were destroyed, and many Germans killed or wounded. We noticed a strange thing some days later when looking over the battleground. There could be no doubt that German casualties were heavy, yet there were only one or two dead left lying on the ground, and we surmised that they must have removed the bodies of their men who were killed. That unusual behaviour was probably to conceal the effectiveness of our artillery fire, and also to

make the casualties of the Tenth Panzers appear lighter than they really were. Few prisoners were taken but that was only to be expected in an armoured attack, and in addition, their infantry hadn't come to grips with our forward troops. The outstanding achievement of the day was the work done by the anti-tank gunners, who had accounted for nearly all the tanks credited to our forces. The Crusader, Sherman and Grant tanks of the Eighth Army hadn't even been committed to the battle, although they had moved up to a handy position behind Tadjera Khir, and were ready for action had the German armour pierced our defences. The Fifty-first Highland Division also did a good job in beating off armoured and infantry attacks, launched by the enemy from his Mareth Line positions. The Eighth Army in conjunction with the R.A.F., was, without doubt, a very near approach to the perfect fighting machine.

Although things were fairly quiet after the Battle of Medenine, we were kept in touch with the tactical situation and enemy movements, by having intelligence reports read to us regularly. We learnt that the enemy was flying reinforcements over from Italy in big Junkers 52 transport 'planes, and that the R.A.F., was doing sterling work in shooting many of these aircraft down, even before they

A German Stuka Dive-Bomber

See page 43

See page 48

A German Junkers 52
Troop-Carrier

reached the African coast. We had a lot to thank the " boys in the air " for. One day, as a further attack by the Germans was very improbable, our Troop Commander took some of us on a tour of inspection beyond Metameur. The ground around Point 140 was simply pitted with hundreds of shell craters, and we could see where the enemy had tried to dig in under fire. I have done it myself on occasions, and I know of many better ways of spending one's time on this earth. Rather gruesome evidence of the terrific bombardment to which the Germans had been subjected, were bits and pieces of the human frame strewn on the ground. To one who has never seen anything like that before, there comes a queer feeling in the pit of the stomach, but it is amazing to what one can become accustomed. I had my first experience of that in Greece where I quickly hardened to the sight of battered humanity. A soldier can't afford to be squeamish! To mark the most forward line reached in their advance the Germans buried one of their number just behind the cairn of stones marking Point 140, and placed a Jerry stick grenade at each corner of the grave. We also had a good look at the four Mark III Special tanks knocked out near Metameur. Our anti-tank gunners had let them come on until the range was a mere 400 yards, and had then opened fire

with devastating effect. At that short distance the six-pound shells had no difficulty in penetrating the German armour. The contents of two of the tanks which had caught fire were not nice to look at, as the crews had been cremated in a very short space of time, but not a great deal remained except ash and a few bones. Such is war!!

For the next few days we had a very easy time, but knew without being told, that we weren't by any means finished yet and there was plenty more hard fighting in store for us.

CHAPTER IV

FIRST PHASE OF THE "LEFT HOOK" OF MARETH LINE

On Friday, March 12th, we were ordered to remove our badges and shoulder titles and to black out the fern leaves on our vehicles, so it was evident that a secret move was shortly to take place. A couple of days later, while other troops of the Eighth Army remained facing the Mareth Line, the New Zealand Division together with tanks and British Artillery in support, moved east along the main road towards Ben Gardane. As our force was above Divisional strength we became known as the New Zealand Corps, with our own General Freyberg in command. A mile or two before reaching Ben Gardane we turned south, and travelled down a narrow sandy road towards the southern end of the Matmata hills. At the side of the track I noticed that the usual practice of the retreating Germans, to chop down the telephone poles in places and make gaps of a mile or two, was still being adhered to. Those telephone lines would have proved of great value to us, if left intact. On coming to a halt in the evening after the day's bone-shaking ride, we discovered that both front springs on our vehicle were broken. Consequently we had to turn

round and go back about fifteen miles to the nearest New Zealand Workshop unit, and as the job couldn't be done before dark, we spent the night there. Early next morning the Kiwi engineers got to work and by midday the truck was ready for the road again. In the meantime however, the Corps had moved on, so we had the road to ourselves and had the advantage of seeing the country by day, whereas the rest of the boys had made the trip during the hours of darkness. The scenery was a definite improvement on the desert, with cultivated areas looking nice and green, and the natives going about their business as though the war was a very remote affair. After winding over the dusty road through the hills we came to the pretty village of Foum Tataouine nestling in a little green valley. Laden with produce from the surrounding fertile fields, donkeys trotted placidly alongside their owners, while women working amongst the crops presented a peaceful rural scene. Many dirty little boys playing by the roadside poked faces at us as we went by, and the usual white hovels completed the picture so common in North Africa. Water seemed plentiful in the locality and various kinds of trees grew in abundance. Foum Tataouine was soon left well behind and the type of country changed from bad to worse. Gone were the green fields, and once more we

had nothing on which to rest our eyes, except barren tussocky desert which was rather depressing. The road possessed quite a good surface, but on coming to the turn-off into the open country, we were held up by Military Police of the New Zealand Provost Company. Our vehicles, stirring up clouds of dust, would give us away to any enemy reconnaissance aircraft that were about, so we had to wait until the evening shadows made our movements less conspicuous. While waiting for the sun to go down, I had a look at some vehicles which had been destroyed by land-mines at the side of the road, and one of them had been a former 6th Field Regiment OP truck of the same make as ours. Apparently, after our engineers had collected all the stray mines and put them in a central dump, some natives came along and calmly re-laid them all over the place. Nice goings on! On catching a couple of these fifth-columnists red-handed, our boys didn't waste any time in asking questions, but just shot them on the spot. It was the only effective way of dealing with them. At long last the sun sank below the distant hills and permission was given to proceed on our way. In travelling as fast as we dared in order to cover as much ground as possible before darkness fell, we had a nightmare of a ride over the roughest country imaginable. Every time we hit a big

bump it felt as though someone was trying to push my head down between my shoulder blades, and to add to my discomfort I occasionally cracked my head on one of the steel bars running across the top of the vehicle. It was a miracle no springs were broken, and after a few hours of violent jolting and swallowing plenty of powdery dust, we reached our dispersal area where the rest of the regiment had already been camped for some twelve hours. Although a bit behind schedule, we arrived in one piece, strange to say.

We stayed in that locality for a few days, and while all the drivers overhauled their vehicles, Alan got his wireless set in tip-top order for the work ahead. On being informed that "F" Troop was going to be attached to the King's Dragoon Guards, an English armoured reconnaissance unit, there was much speculation as to how long we could expect to continue our existence in this world. Our job was to give them the needed fire-power while on reconnaissance miles out in front of the corps, and so make their advance much more rapid. Some of the boys were downright pessimistic and more or less took it for granted that they would shortly become casualties, but I didn't mind the idea as in many ways it was similar to the job we usually did in RF. Practically all misgivings as to our future welfare

were dispelled after our first action in support of the K.D.G's, but I am getting a bit ahead of myself.

In the evening of March 19th, we assembled in close formation, and just on dark began our long night march from the pre-arranged starting point. To keep us on the right track, the New Zealand Provost Company had gone on ahead to mark out the axis of advance with the familiar N.Z. sign. That consisted of the regular spacing of iron stakes surmounted by black diamonds cut out of tin, and at intervals of a mile or so, lamps were hung on the stakes to give us our direction in the pitch black of night. At one stage we drifted somehow off the Diamond Track and for awhile it looked as though we were lost. However we soon picked up the roaring motors of the convoy away to our left front and lost no time in re-joining it, and regaining our correct position with the regiment. The convoy eventually came to a halt but there was no rest for " F " Troop, and on we went to contact the K.D.G's, who were some distance ahead. " Anyone seen the K.D.G's," was the cry as we passed the various units bedded down alongside the track, but it wasn't until about one o'clock in the morning that we finally located them. They greeted us with the news that they were getting under way at five o'clock, so we im-

mediately lay down to snatch a few hours rest. Right on the dot of five we started off, and moved slowly forward as the sun appeared over the horizon and shed its golden rays over the barren scene. We hadn't gone far before hearing the cracking of heavy guns ahead, and soon came up on a battery of British mediums which were engaging the enemy at long range. Free French troops were also in evidence with their armoured cars and light tanks, and up to that time they had been maintaining contact with the enemy forces in that area. Shortly we topped a rise and looked down on the flat plain which stretched away in front of us. There was nothing in sight. While our four guns remained behind the ridge, we in RF, accompanied by three patrol cars of the K.D.G's, moved slowly forward. The plain wasn't as flat as it had appeared at first sight, and there were numerous shallow valleys in which we could conceal ourselves should the necessity arise. On reaching the crest of a wave in the ground, we saw afar off the tiny village of Ksar Tarsine. A couple of small shells whistled close past our heads, so we thought discretion the better part of valour, and retired to the small valley in our rear. Away on our right a formation of British tanks was speeding forward and as soon as the enemy spotted them, he brought all his avail-

able fire to bear on the advancing armour. At times the tanks were hidden in the smoke of bursting shells, but they went on without faltering and made a great sight as they bore down on the enemy guns. Evidently the German gunners were kept very busy and completely ignored us as we proceeded cautiously forward, first to one ridge and then on to the next. Suddenly machine-gun bullets began to buzz past us like angry bees and we soon located the source of the trouble. A couple of German armoured cars were hull-down behind a crest some 2,000 yards from us, and we were forced to move back a little in order that we might stand up to see the effect of our shells which were quickly on the way towards them. The result was better than we expected, and after a few of our well-aimed projectiles landed very close, they made off at high speed. Ksar Tarsine was soon in our hands and our tanks swept through it in pursuit of the enemy who was in full flight. One tank in particular, a Crusader, put on a spectacular show for us as it chased after a German eight-wheeled armoured car. The car was speeding down a road as the Crusader cut across country in an attempt to head it off. With its six-pounder gun barking as it tore over the uneven ground at over thirty miles an hour, and with clouds of dust spewing from its whirling tracks, the

tank made an impressive sight. Unfortunately, the German car had a slight lead and also had a passable road to travel along, so the Crusader lost the race, although it was a close finish.

All day we proceeded slowly forward, and every now and then our guns went into action, fired a few rounds, and then moved on again. On the left of the broad valley lay the road the Germans were using in their withdrawal, while we travelled down the centre, keeping almost parallel to detachments of the retreating enemy. It was a peculiar situation! An altogether strange sight met our eyes as we got further down the valley. Millions of locusts, disturbed by our moving trucks, whirred up from where they were eating, and even the stunted scrub of the desert was entirely stripped of its greenery. So completely had they glutted themselves, that many of the voracious little creatures were unable to remove themselves from the path of our on-coming vehicles, and just moved sluggishly about on the ground. It was the first time I had seen locusts in such great number, and I could fully appreciate the destruction they would cause amongst grain-fields and orchards. Towards evening we drew nearer the high hills of the Djebel Tebaga range to which the enemy was gradually withdrawing, and in the lengthening shadows there appeared to be no passage

through the blue-black wall ahead of us. Suddenly, at the foot of the bluish hills in the distance, a few tiny flashes of flame could be seen, and the next minute the ominous whine of shells was heard as they winged their way towards us. With loud explosions and whistling shrapnel they burst, rather too close for comfort, so we quickly shifted and dropped down into a small dry watercourse not far away. Having lost his targets the enemy ceased firing, and when darkness fell, as it did shortly afterwards, we laagered in close formation and spent the night on the open plain in company with a squadron of the K.D.G's.

The following morning we again went a mile or two forward of " F " Troop, which in turn was some miles ahead of the corps, and that was to be our usual practice for some weeks to come. While out there we watched with much enjoyment the bombing and straffing of enemy positions by 'planes of the American U.S.A.A.F., and the ineffectual ack-ack fire didn't deter them one bit. They dived and twisted through the air and every so often a huge plume of oily black smoke denoted that their bullets had found their mark. However, they quite spoilt the whole show as far as we were concerned, when they swung over our heads after the completion of their business over enemy lines. They must have thought

that our four guns, being so far away from the main force were hostile, so promptly machine-gunned the troop, destroying both the ammunition and petrol trucks. Although riddled, the petrol truck failed to catch fire, but the ammunition vehicle burned fiercely. Luckily there was only one casualty, " Simmy," and he sustained rather a nasty wound in the wrist from an explosive cannon shell which burst and buried several small pieces of shrapnel in various portions of his anatomy. Ironically enough, the two destroyed trucks were plainly marked with the R.A.F. insignia painted on by " Simmy " himself, and there was really no excuse for the mistake. Blunders can't always be avoided, and we could be thankful that we didn't have to take the punishment from the air that Jerry did.

Later in the day I had an experience that will take a long time to forget, and it is a miracle I am here to tell the tale. We were just sailing serenely along behind the three leading patrol cars, when suddenly there was a terrific explosion in the front of RF, and clouds of acrid smoke enveloped us. My first thought was that a shell had collected us and I was waiting for the next. All was quiet except for a fit of coughing by Dick who got some of the smoke into his lungs. Then the four of us said in one breath; " Are you al-

right?" We were, strange to say, and the only personal damage was the seat torn out of the captain's trousers, showing a nice bare expanse of white skin with a long red scratch across it. We had to laugh at it and maybe our hilarity was a little forced as reaction set in. We had run over a land-mine, and it seemed a miracle that no one was hurt, but RF took most of the blast and thereby qualified for the junk heap. The crews of the K.D.G. cars out in front also thought we had been hit by a shell and came tearing back to get cover in the lee of a nearby hill. First one and then another hit mines and disappeared in a huge cloud of dirty grey smoke, while we just managed to signal the third to a stop before it too ran into the danger area. Miraculously the two crews were as lucky as we, and there were no casualties. It was amazing that the three cars had gone through the field safely before us without setting any of the infernal things off. Cleverly concealed as they were with green grass, the mines were next to impossible to spot as we travelled along. The left front wheel of our car had described an arc through the air and finished up about fifty yards away, while the heavy armour-plated bonnet was blown some distance forward. With bits and pieces hanging loose everywhere the engine was in a horrible mess,

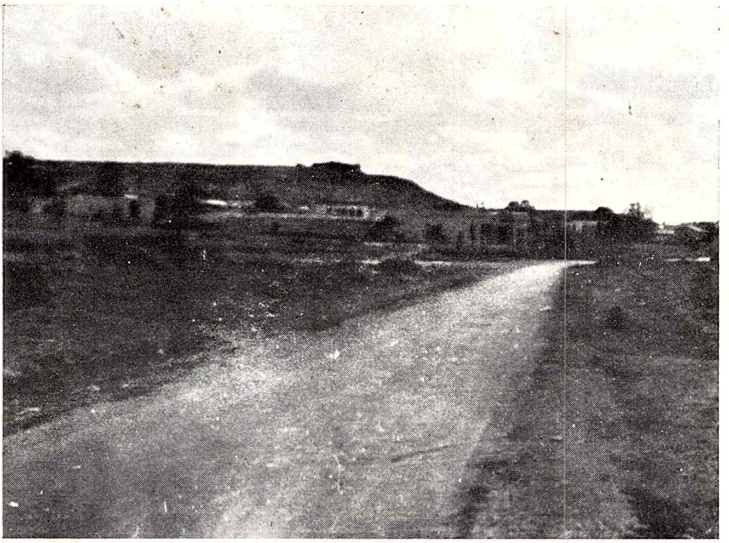
to say nothing of Dick's and my bedding which had been strapped on the front. Our blankets looked as though some man-sized moths had been at them. Somehow our wireless remained undamaged, so Alan sent a message back asking the battery to hurry up another vehicle for us, and in the meantime we removed all our belongings from the erstwhile RF. Our Troop Commander preferred to go forward on the remaining K.D.G. car, instead of waiting for the new truck to come.

Our replacement, a small 8 cwt. truck known as a P.U., duly arrived, and it was with some misgivings that we packed our gear on to it while Alan installed his wireless. We had become accustomed to armour-plating (although thin) around us, but nevertheless it wasn't the first time we had used a "thin-skinned" vehicle for our observation work. In the meantime a path was cleared through the mine-field and our guns went on, and after boiling the billy for a cup of tea we went forward to catch them up. Our Troop Commander had told us to stay with the guns when we had transferred all our gear to the new vehicle. We had a vague idea of the route taken by the troop so moved out on to the main El Hamma road and went along it for a few miles. No trace could be found of the guns so we turned round and went slowly back. Here again, on

the road, the Germans had sown land-mines, and in our hurry to catch up with the troop we had driven right over them. On the return journey, Dick noticed the fresh patches of newly dug soil on the surface, so we stopped to investigate, and sure enough there was a road-block of over a dozen evenly spaced mines. Although our wheels left impressions in the fresh earth, it was the spacing that enabled us to run right over the area without detonating any of the contraptions, and I hate to think what would have happened to us had one exploded beneath our light truck. Lady Luck was certainly with us!! As we still had to find the troop, we left the area untouched and went on, eventually finding where the guns had turned off the road and gone into position in a little rocky valley. Later on, Dick and I received permission from "Amy" our gun position officer to lift the mines and make the road safe for further traffic. I had done a short course on mines and the lifting of them, down at our base camp at Maadi in Egypt, so had a fair idea of how to handle the Teller-mines laid in the road. Only one in the whole block had a booby trap attached, and to that we fixed a fifty yard length of telephone cable, lay flat on the ground, and gave it a good hard pull. It detonated with a terrific explosion much to the consternation of the boys of "F"

Troop who were watching proceedings from a respectable distance, and blew quite a large crater in the side of the road. The troop was moving on with the K.D.G's, so as soon as the highway was safe for vehicles to travel over, we tailed up behind the last gun in the small column. That night, after we bedded down in laager, the guns of the N.Z. Corps fired a barrage to cover a local infantry attack, and our men succeeded in capturing some strong points and forcing the enemy back a short way. Our four guns not being included in the programme, we tried to get some sleep, but owing to shells whistling overhead and the general clamour of battle, didn't get much rest at all.

At "first light" the next morning, we moved back to another gun position alongside the El Hamma road, and while the "Boss" went out forward in a K.D.G. patrol car, we three in the new RF stayed with the guns. During the morning we spotted two or three men walking up the side of a hill away behind us, so taking a Tommy-gun and rifles, went back in RF to investigate. They turned out to be only wandering Arabs who had pitched their tents there, and they didn't seem to be able to make out whether we were British or German. Their little encampment which had obviously been there for some considerable



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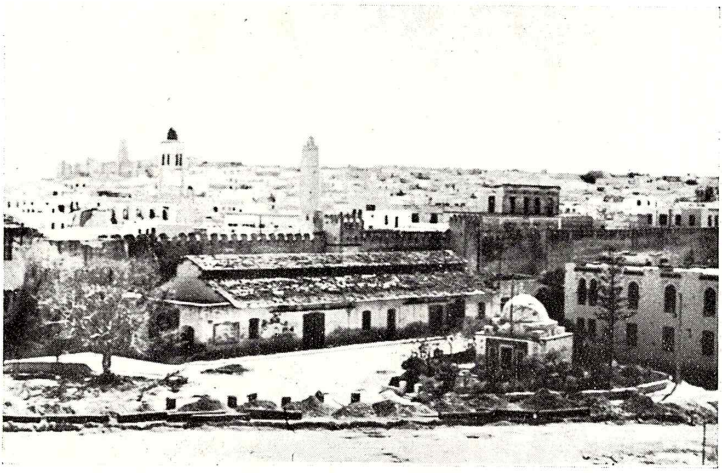
Foum Tataouine



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The White Buildings of Sousse

time, smelt to "high heaven," and we were quite pleased to leave them to their own devices and return to the guns. While in that position a couple of Messerschmitt fighters came screaming up the road behind us, only about a hundred feet off the ground. I no sooner heard the whine of their engines than I was out of the truck and flat on my stomach. However they completely disregarded us, maybe thinking we were a German rearguard unit, and went on to bomb the forward patrol where our Troop Commander was. He told us afterwards that the bombs dropped very close to the armoured cars, and some seconds elapsed before they exploded. One of the car drivers stood up when the bombs failed to burst at first, but that proved his undoing, and he suffered a nasty stomach wound from a piece of flying shrapnel. He died some hours afterwards. Later in the day we received orders to move over to the right flank of the corps in support of another squadron of the K.D.G.'s, and we were destined to remain there for some days.

Our guns had an ideal position in a little valley, and the O.P. was established on the summit of a small crest about a mile away, and from there we could direct our shells on to enemy dug-in outposts in the foothills on our front. They were mostly Italian positions which could be seen from the forward patrol

cars, and they frequently advised us by wireless when to alter our range or line of fire. Their corrections were not as laid down by Volume II of the Artillery Manual, but served the purpose quite well. Such orders as "A little more to the right," or "You are a couple of hundred yards short," occasionally came over the air, and they were of great assistance to us. On one occasion, when some Italians had been subjected to consistent shelling from our guns, they seemed undecided as to whether they should surrender or not. Over the wireless came the observation: "I think another one will make up their minds for them," and, sure enough, a further round of gunfire brought them running out of their holes, frantically waving white flags. I think a white flag must be issued to each Italian soldier, as it seems to be an indispensable part of his equipment. "F" Troop was officially credited with that bag of forty-three prisoners. Each evening after dark we moved back a mile or two and laagered within a ring of K.D.G. armoured cars, and as there was at least one man awake during the night we felt very secure. Sometimes I lay awake and listened to the steady drone of aeroplane engines as our night bombers roared their way through the skies, to and from the enemy's lines. They were as regular as clockwork, and it was a real

" shuttle service." Occasionally the Germans retaliated, but theirs was a very feeble effort alongside the R.A.F.

One day the Free French Force, under the command of General LeClerc, came and took up a position near our guns, while their O.P. was right alongside ours. All the way from the Lake Chad area the majority of these troops were dark-skinned natives, but under French officers, and, equipped as they were with British 25-pounder and French 75 mm. guns, they presented a formidable little striking force. I was astounded at the speed with which the native troops scaled the precipitous hills on our right, and there rounded up quite a few Italians who had no stomach for fighting. At their O.P. the French had all sorts of instruments which we never used (range-finders etc.) and they obtained excellent results by their employment. General LeClerc was a fine-looking man, and had only one small disadvantage in that he couldn't speak English, and had to employ an interpreter. It sounded queer to us when we heard the French signallers conversing over their wireless sets in their native language, as they talked away at a terrific speed, and it seemed an unintelligible gabble to us. They were fine chaps, those Frenchmen, and we co-operated very well.

Our 8cwt. P.U. was replaced by a General

Stuart (Honey) tank for the O.P. party, but as there was no room in it for me I was temporarily out of a job and just the spare part around the place. I shifted my belongings over to a 15cwt. truck (Y3), and travelled on it for some time in company with Mac, "F" Troop's left section leader, another Mac as driver, and George, our troop mechanic. It was quite a change on that truck, as it ran all sorts of odd messages for the troop, and one of its jobs was to get all empty water tins from the other vehicles, take them away, and bring them back full. One morning we went to a nearby well to fill up, and while there decided to heat up some water and have a bath. It was quite a success, and we all felt a lot cleaner after a real good sponge over.

On the morning of March 26th we were informed of the plan of attack for that day, and even to us, who knew little of the finer points of strategy, success seemed a certainty.

A paragraph here may serve to give the reader an idea of the general situation elsewhere on the Eighth Army's front. Away over the other side of the Matmata hills was the formidable Mareth Line, on which infantry of the British 50th Division launched their assault on the night of March 20th. Under cover of an intense air and artillery bombardment, they attacked by moonlight and fought their way

across the deep Wadi Zigzau, transformed into a morass by recent heavy rains. An attempt to construct a causeway for supporting tanks and anti-tank guns for the infantry already across the Wadi met only with partial success, as the whole ravine was literally swept clean by enemy fire. However, some tanks and more infantry did get through to reinforce those who had established the bridgehead. On the afternoon of the second day of that bloody battle the German 15th Panzer Division launched a fierce counter-attack, and by sheer weight of numbers forced the gallant British back. Gradually those heroic men were compelled to fall back, and so did they lose that hard-won ground so many of them fought and died for. The Last Post sounded for many a friend and foe in that bitter struggle. The bridgehead at Wadi Zigzau was abandoned on March 23rd, and then General Montgomery decided to make his main thrust in the N.Z. Corps sector, so I will take the reader back there.

At 2 o'clock in the afternoon of March 26th the attack began with relays of R.A.F. fighter-bombers, and for the following two hours they kept up continuous low-level bombing and straffing attacks on enemy positions. Then the guns of the Eighth Army opened up with a mighty roar and fired a barrage which lasted

for over an hour and a-half, and, although we could only hear the bark of guns occasionally owing to the high wind, hundreds of gun flashes were visible through the swirling dust. It was a real dust-storm, and the stuff got into one's ears, eyes, and mouth, but for once it was blowing into the enemy's face, so our infantry probably blessed it. Under such conditions was the Battle of Tebaga Gap fought. The plain soon became a moving mass of tanks and men as our forces pushed forward to the attack. Putting myself in the enemy's place, under a veritable rain of shells and blinded by the choking dust as it stung his eyes, I could just imagine his feelings as he watched the armoured might of the Eighth Army roll steadily on towards him. With such odds against him, and with the sight of gleaming Kiwi bayonets before his eyes, it was no wonder his line broke quickly. Thousands of prisoners were taken, and many of the Italians had only been in the country a week or two, having been rushed over from Italy to reinforce the sadly depleted Axis forces. Our Maori Battalion, which had a very bitter engagement with a German Panzer Grenadier regiment, suffered the inevitable casualties, but eventually won their ground. It was during this fighting that Second-Lieutenant Ngarimu won the highest of all awards, the Victoria Cross. The first

Maori to win this decoration, it seemed a great pity that it should have to be awarded posthumously. In charge of a detachment of Maoris, Second-Lieutenant Ngarimu was ordered to clear the Germans from their firmly entrenched positions on a small rocky feature, and throughout the ensuing day and night he inspired his men by his sheer courage and determination. Despite the fact that he was twice wounded during the engagement, he refused to leave his platoon, and as the Germans launched fierce counter-attacks he urged his men to greater efforts to hold their hard-won ground. On the morning of the 27th, when the Germans again attempted to dislodge the heroic Maoris, Lieutenant Ngarimu totally disregarded personal safety and bravely challenged the enemy to the last. Thus died a courageous and gallant man, but not in vain.

Although we of "F" Troop were far removed from the battle raging on the plain, we engaged the few targets within range, and were kept in close touch with the situation by wireless reports coming from a forward K.D.G. patrol. As far as we could make out, the battle was progressing very favourably, and was tending to develop into a rout.

On the following day, while British elements chased the retreating enemy towards El Hamma, "F" Troop, together with a

squadron of the K.D.G.'s, moved forward to laager behind the well-known Point 201. This feature was a small hill where the enemy had formerly been well dug in, and was situated on its own well out towards the centre of the wide plain. As on the previous day, a strong wind again sprang up, and once more we had to contend with the swirling dust of a "khamseen" that lasted until evening. When at last the wind died down and the air began to clear it was a great relief to breathe in comfort and not take down gulps of dust-laden air the whole time. That evening, after our day's spell behind Point 201, we moved on parallel to the El Hamma road, but didn't go very far before bedding down in close formation.

CHAPTER V.

THE MARETH LINE OUTFLANKED

After the Battle of Tebaga Gap our main force split up into two groups, one making for El Hamma, and the other straight for Gabes, on the coast, in an attempt to cut off the enemy should he try and hold his Mareth positions. We were in the latter group, and at dawn on March 28th again went out on our scouting job with the K.D.G.'s, some miles to the right of the axis of advance. Before long fire-orders came over the wireless, so the guns quickly dropped into action in a small dry water-course, and were soon pumping shells over the ridge in front. Not many rounds had been fired when the order came down to stop. Apparently the dug-in Italians who were the object of our shelling had had enough, and were busily waving white flags at our forward patrol cars. In all, about two hundred Italians came out of their holes in the ground, and were soon lined up like a collection of naughty school children. On looking over their positions later, we were amazed that they hadn't shown more fight, as they were well equipped with anti-tank guns, mortars, and machine-guns, and there was certainly no shortage of ammunition. Among the Iti dug-outs we came across a well-filled medical store to which we

promptly helped ourselves. There were hypodermic syringes, hundreds of rolls of bandages, and all the necessaries for a regimental first aid post, so we bundled a lot of the stuff into boxes and took it back to our unit doctor at R.H.Q. Needless to say, he was overjoyed to get it, as his own stocks were running very low, and on giving him one of the syringes he promised me a bottle of beer next time we reached civilization. I'm afraid I never got it. On our way back to R.H.Q. we picked up a couple of German medical officers attached to the Italians, and they didn't hide the fact that they were glad it was all over for them. I tried to converse with them, but neither understood English, although they were both obviously grateful for the ride of some miles to the central mobilisation point for prisoners. They had evidently been kept busy with casualties, as their field-grey uniforms were liberally spattered with the blood of wounded men, and their blood-shot eyes were those of tired men. The Italians had to walk to the prisoners' centre, but nobody shed any tears over that. Just after handing over the two Germans I happened to look up, and saw a formation of Junkers 88 medium bombers diving to the attack. We immediately flattened on the ground, but it turned out to be quite unnecessary, as they dropped their loads of destruction on a group

of vehicles about a mile ahead of us. We spent that night in a dry water-course near the El Hamma road, catching up with the troop early next morning, as it hadn't moved far during our absence on the previous day.

While we had been away in Y3, George, our mechanic, had salvaged a 15cwt Chevrolet truck which the Germans had abandoned because of a defective petrol pump, and before long he had it in going order. He had also picked up an Italian 20 mm. Breda gun which was a good little ack-ack weapon, so we tied it on to the truck with a steel chain and towed it along behind us. This vehicle was certainly no flash limousine, but, despite the fact that it had no bonnet, hood, or doors, and the seats were very rickety, it possessed a good engine and set of tyres, and that was the main thing. I decided to travel with George, and, with the job of manning the Breda and keeping it in first-class order, I had something to occupy my time, and that was much better than riding round on Y3 doing nothing. George was a man getting on in years, and had seen service in the Great War, and he and I used to have some great old arguments about different things. I'm afraid his leg was pulled a lot, as he always took everything so seriously, but we usually got on well together.

Then the enemy forces finally broke and

ran, and away we went over the rough country after them, passing many knocked-out vehicles and some guns that hadn't run quite fast enough. Soon, from the top of a hill, we caught sight of the town of Gabes, its white buildings and green trees standing out plainly against the deep blue of the Mediterranean in the distance. It was there that General Freyberg passed us, and with his smiling face we could see that he was pleased with the progress of his forces. His orders were to push on fast and give the enemy no respite. We only had a momentary glimpse of Gabes, as we soon dropped down to lower country, and from the direction of our advance it was obvious that we were by-passing the town. We learnt later that some New Zealand units had been lucky enough to go through the place, where they received a vociferous welcome, but apart from that there apparently wasn't much to see. With Gabes in our hands it meant that the gap between the sea and the big salt marsh, Shott el Djerid, was closed to Axis traffic, but the enemy had foreseen that possibility and had withdrawn in time to prevent his retreat being cut off. Some fifteen miles from Gabes was the village of Oudref, and there the Germans decided to fight a rearguard action to enable their main force to prepare defensive positions further back in the Wadi Akarit. Our guns

went into position in a small wadi behind a convenient ridge and proceeded to shell enemy outposts between Oudref and ourselves. On our left a cliff rose sheer from the plain, and nestling on the top was a small stone building of doubtful age. The Germans must have thought the building was being used as an O.P., for they began to range carefully on to it, but only one direct hit was obtained, and most of the shells either went right over the top or crashed into the cliff-face. We got rather a nasty fright when a couple dropped very short indeed, but we knew that he couldn't see us, so they were only strays. Huge billowing clouds of dust behind us denoted that the main force was coming up fast, and before long shells from more guns in our rear were whining overhead on their way to the enemy. In the gathering dusk our armour assembled in readiness for an attack, but darkness fell with startling rapidity and only a minor brush with the enemy tanks resulted. All this time I had the Breda ready for action but was due to be disappointed as German aircraft were very few and far between. A couple of Messerschmitts did dive low over the ridge in front of us, but with screaming engines they were gone before George and I had time to swing the gun into action. Not that I would have hit anything anyway. As

if to make up for the lack of enemy 'planes, some R.A.F. fighter-bombers dropped their "eggs" just to our rear, but their aim was very poor and we could only hope they did a better job when bombing the Germans or Italians. That night, in case the enemy might try any funny business, we withdrew a few miles to laager with the K.D.G's. It was a queer evening with not a breath of wind and the lowering clouds boded ill for continued fine weather, so George and I put up a "bivvy" tent and were glad of it later as it rained quite heavily. Apparently some of the boys had decided to take a chance on the weather, and shortly after the first drops of rain fell we derived much amusement from the sounds of frenzied activity outside. All sorts of appropriate adjectives were used to describe the weather and as fast as tent pegs were driven in someone would trip over them in the pitch darkness, and out they would come. It was quite some time before everybody had settled in, and all was peace and quiet.

During the hours of darkness the German rearguard withdrew from Oudref, so in the early morning the way was again clear to move on. Our signallers' truck (M5) developed engine trouble, so while the guns went on, George got busy on the motor and before long

M5 was ready for the road. The troop had lost no time and we were left well behind, but knew roughly in which direction they had gone, so in our two trucks followed the main road north. On reaching Oudref we found that the main highway was impassable as the Germans had done an expert job in blowing a huge piece out of the road to let a muddy stream run through it. The local inhabitants lent a very willing hand in the repair work but as it would be hours before it was fixed, we decided to go through the village itself and see if we could cross the stream at some other point. Oudref was like any other native village with dirty narrow streets, whitewashed mud hovels, and surrounded by the usual belt of date palms. As we moved slowly through the streets the populace turned out to give us the once-over, and one little chap not five years old, not realising that we weren't Germans, promptly gave us the Nazi salute. However, one of his elders soon corrected him, and probably gave him a short lesson on how to greet the English. Although not too sure how we would treat them, the natives were only too willing to help us, and it was obvious that they had seen enough of the Germans. It wasn't until the afternoon that we finally caught up to " F " Troop, which was in action well forward, and we were no longer on our own, as

many other guns nearby were hurling their shells into the enemy lines. The main highway north, a mile or two to our left, was the main target for enemy guns, as he plastered it with shells of all calibres in an endeavour to retard our advance. It was very nice not having anything thrown at us for a change. We stayed in that position until dusk, when we packed up and began to retire to a laager area for the night. While on the move back towards Oudref some enemy medium bombers swooped low overhead as they sped away from the scene of their raid on Eighth Army supply columns in the rear. The air was fairly alive with tracer bullets and the pin-point flashes of bursting shells, but in the gathering darkness the aircraft were extremely difficult targets, and none were brought down. I had wrapped the Breda up for the night, and didn't even bother to remove the covering for a shot, and anyway the 'planes would have been out of range before I got the first shell away.

Next morning we returned to our previous position, and while the guns did some desultory firing I cleaned the Breda and also cleared a lot of the accumulated rubbish out of our truck. It certainly needed a spring-clean. I found that unless the ack-ack gun was spotless and well oiled it was inclined to jam, and that would never do. Later in the day we were

relieved by a troop of the Fifth Field Regiment, who took over our position, and then we rejoined our regiment, which was established fairly well forward. As the situation had become static, we were temporarily detached from the K.D.G.'s, but would rejoin them when the Eighth Army once more got on the move. The guns were well sited in a little sandy wadi, while the wagon-lines for our motor transport were well to the rear, and it was there that George and I stayed for the rest of the day. Just in front of us four German 88 mm. guns were dug in and manned by a troop of English gunners. The guns, together with plenty of ammunition, had been captured some time previously, and did a good job of work all through the Tunisian campaign. The "Tommy" gunners were very unlucky, though, as a complete gun-crew was wiped out at Tebaga Gap, and near Oudref German night bombers killed a couple of men, but at the same time they had the satisfaction of giving the Germans some of their own back. Around that area were large pools of stagnant water lying everywhere, and consequently mosquitoes bred by the million. They belonged to a very determined breed, and, like the German bombers, waited until darkness began to fall before launching their attack. Until we got more or less used to them it was next to impossible to sleep. When

I later shifted the Breda up to "F" Troop position, on the off-chance that it might be of some use there, I noticed with much relief that the "mossies" were fewer in number than at the wagon-lines. To make the little ack-ack weapon a more permanent fixture, I took off the detachable wheels and mounted it on the three legs provided, thus enabling a 360-degree traverse. I could just sit on the seat, twirl a small hand-wheel, then round and round I would go. There was always a pan of twelve 20 mm. shells in the gun ready for any emergency, and before long I got the opportunity of trying the weapon out. A few sleek Messerschmitt fighters dived low over our lines, and, on swinging the gun round to meet them, I pressed hard on the foot trigger. One bark, and then silence!! At first I couldn't make out what was wrong, but soon discovered the trouble in a cartridge jammed up the breech, and that necessitated the removal of the barrel. By the time the ack-ack gun was ready for action again the black-crossed fighters were probably on the ground back at their own 'drome. As time went on more and more enemy aircraft began to make their appearance until it was like old times at Alamein, but the Stuka dive-bombers were still "classed as missing." On one occasion, when fighter-bombers attacked our forward infantry lines

and then flew over our heads, I let go with the Breda, and some of the tiny puffs of white smoke from my bursting shells were very close to the 'planes. For a moment I thought I had hit one, and the boys who were watching the show reckoned that " F " Troop could nearly claim the credit for one enemy aircraft. Still, a miss is as good as a mile. Claude, the driver of our gun position officer's vehicle, helped me with the Breda ammunition on occasions, as George was back at the wagon-lines, where his job was to remedy defects on the trucks of the troop.

Just on dark one evening our No. 4 gun, together with a gun from both the Fifth and Sixth Field Regiments, went out forward for the purpose of sniping. Den, the jovial gun-sergeant from Christchurch in charge of No. 4, wasn't too keen on the idea, and we didn't blame him one bit. After getting all set up away out in front, the three guns opened fire, and before many minutes had elapsed the enemy spotted their muzzle flashes and proceeded to shell them unmercifully. They hugged the ground as bursting shells rained thickly around them, and it was sheer suicide to remain there and continue firing. All they could do was to wait until the shelling subsided somewhat, then pack up hurriedly and return to the comparative safety of their own

lines. No wonder those men were badly shaken when they arrived back, and it seemed nothing short of a miracle that only one man was wounded out of the three gun-crews. The experiment wasn't repeated!!

We were fairly secure in our little wadi, which had plainly been a swift-running stream during the winter rains, and, caused by erosion, the banks were absolutely perpendicular in many places. A number of the boys took advantage of that fact, and built their slit-trenches underneath the banks, where no projectile from the enemy's lines could possibly reach them. From the top of the crest forward of our guns we could see away out in front of us the forbidding peaks of the hills held by the enemy adjacent to their Wadi Akarit defences. To take that ground meant some hard fighting and the inevitable loss of life.

While in that gun position some mail arrived, and those days were always eagerly looked forward to. Parcels and letters were more than welcome, and if the people at home in far-off New Zealand could have seen the expressions of joy on the faces of the men as they read their mail and opened parcels they would have been amply repaid for the time and trouble taken in sending them overseas. What a boost we got from those letters!! After getting his mail, each man would go off by him-

self, and the boys would be scattered all over the place in various attitudes, eagerly devouring the latest news from home. We then compared notes, and between us could conjure up some idea of conditions back in our home country, and newspapers were always more than welcome, as they gave us detailed news of the doings in New Zealand. The army seemed to realise that mail was a very necessary item in the soldier's every-day life, as it was always brought forward as quickly as conditions permitted.

Before long large quantities of 25-pounder ammunition began to arrive on the position, and it looked as though an attack was shortly to be launched against the enemy defences in Wadi Akarit, which we had been facing for several days.

CHAPTER VI.

AKARIT TO SFAX

On Monday, April 5th, an informal parade was held on the position, when we were told when and how the attack on Wadi Akarit was to take place. That night the infantry of the Fourth Indian Division and the " Scotties " of the Fifty-first Highland Division were to start the ball rolling with a thrust into the hills, and all day long more and more men came up to the forward areas. There was no moon when darkness fell, and in the pitch black of night they launched their attack. The Indians were given the job of clearing the enemy from the high features on the left sector of our front, and that they did very successfully, the Gurkhas using their wicked-looking knives with deadly effect. With their always smiling faces, the chubby, brown-skinned little hill-men from India were a happy-go-lucky lot, and this was the sort of fighting they revelled in. The " Scotties," who preferred the rifle and bayonet, were allotted to the central sector, and they, too, attained their objective according to plan. The Wadi Akarit, a raging torrent carrying the heavy rains to the sea in winter and in summer a deep, dried-up ravine, was a difficult feature to cross, but the men of the Eighth Army did the job.

In the " wee sma' hours " on the morning of the 6th we were roused from our sleep, and the guns were manned in readiness for the barrage, which was to commence at 4 o'clock. I was giving a hand with ammunition on No. 2 gun, and, while waiting for zero hour, I sat down on a box of shells and quietly puffed away at a cigarette. A shell was rammed up the breech with a dull thud, and following it came the clang of the brass cartridge as it, too, was pushed home and the breech-block snapped shut. Then came the orders through the still night air: " One minute to go," " Thirty seconds to go," " Fifteen," " Ten," " Five," and then " Fire." The silence was shattered by the roar of hundreds of guns, and the night was made livid as the barrage, timed to a second, got under way. We fired solidly for two hours before getting a break, and the enemy guns made a very feeble reply to the tremendous weight of shells rained on them. When dawn broke the battle still went on with unabated fury as the Germans, caught like rats in a trap, fought fiercely to regain their lost ground. It was no use, as our forces held tenaciously on to their newly-won territory, and, in addition, our tanks poured forward to join in the fray at the foot of the distant hills. The British Fiftieth Division, however, struck trouble in the form of a well-defended anti-

tank ditch, but that difficulty was overcome later in the day. Soon hundreds of prisoners began to stream back from the Indian Division's front, and we got a good look at them as they trudged wearily past our positions. Italian officers marched at the head of these never-ending columns of ill-clad soldiers, and seemed quite proud of the fact that they had surrendered, while lagging behind were some of the slightly wounded being assisted along by their comrades. After all, the Germans had commandeered most of their transport and left them with the choice of either being killed or taken prisoner, so one couldn't really blame them for not wishing to continue the fight. They had nothing to gain and everything to lose under those conditions, but still they were poor fighters at any time.

The battle progressed favourably all day, and in the late afternoon, once more attached to our friends the K.D.G.'s, we moved forward a mile or two from our gun position. On halting at the top of a small rise, we could see before us the broad expanse of green plain, literally choked with tanks, guns, and all kinds of transport, as the Eighth Army once more began to move forward. Away in the distance, where the foothills rose sharply from the valley, forward British tanks could be seen moving up the lower slopes, amid the grey

smoke of bursting shells. Apparently the Germans still had some kick left, but theirs was a very weak effort. Suddenly we heard the roaring of aircraft engines behind us, and turned round to behold several twin-engined Messerschmitts 110 almost on top of us. They were skimming over the ground a mere few hundred feet up, and their bombs could plainly be seen as they were released on their deadly mission. Being delayed-action, it was some seconds before they exploded with a terrific crash, and huge clouds of dirty grey smoke blotted out the countryside, while white-hot fragments whined viciously through the air. It was a nasty raid, and caught us unawares, but luckily very little damage was done, although M3, our troop's spare signal truck, was practically a "write-off," with numerous splinters through the radiator. Anti-aircraft guns were quickly in action, and the rapid barking of some Bofors nearby denoted that the Kiwi gunners were on the job. Three of the 'planes were downed before the range became too great for effective shooting, and one of them fled towards the hills with clouds of dense black smoke pouring from it. The odds were greatly against that Messerschmitt returning safely to its base. After all the fuss and bother of the raid was over we moved forward through fertile fields of green grass, and, after dispersing well, prepared to

settle down for the night. I couldn't be bothered digging a hole to sleep in, but when enemy bombers began coming over in relays dropping "butterfly" bombs I decided to get some peace of mind, and dug a trench in the rich brown earth. These particular bombs were dropped in large containers, which, by means of a timing device, opened up after falling some distance and released numerous small anti-personnel bombs. These nice little "toys" were fitted with flaps resembling the wings of a butterfly, which caused them to gyrate in all directions in the air, and in consequence they covered a wide area. On hitting the ground they went off like a string of fireworks, but weren't quite so harmless. However, the enemy was concentrating his attacks on the supply columns moving forward under the cover of darkness, and very few fell anywhere near us.

Next morning, while the guns went on ahead with the K.D.G.'s, George and I went back to the Regimental "B" Echelon for another White Scout Car to replace the Honey tank being used by "F" Troop for observation work. I took over the armoured car while George drove his "limousine," and together we set out to catch up with the troop, which had put some distance between us in the meantime. On coming to the gap made by our engineers

in the enemy mine-fields, we found the way blocked by columns of transport packed bumper to bumper. Accordingly we tried to detour, but only finished up worse off than we started, and eventually rejoined the conglomeration of vehicles crawling slowly through the narrow defile. What a bombing target we presented!! But the R.A.F. had complete mastery of the air, so we had nothing to worry about on that score. The whole area was a mass of dug-in enemy positions, and, on coming across some Breda gun-pits hurriedly abandoned by the Italians, we took the opportunity of replenishing our stocks of ammunition. Jammed in between trucks and tanks, we slowly made our way through the gap, and once out into the open country beyond we were able to move about more freely. There we met our Battery Commander in his Honey tank, and asked him if he could tell us how far ahead "F" Troop was. He replied, "Oh, I think it is about ten miles from here, and what the hell do you think you're doing with that armoured car?" Apparently it was supposed to have been left in rear with "B" Echelon until called for, and that would only be when the O.P. vehicle of either troop in the battery was out of commission. Luckily a spare driver had come along with us, so he took the car back while George and I went on to

find the guns. With the way a lot clearer than in the defile through the hills, we made much more rapid progress as we bumped along over the uneven ground. Before dropping down to the broad plain below the hills, we halted while I tried to locate the troop through my field-glasses. It was hopeless to try and recognise it amongst the various little groups of vehicles away in the distance, so we decided to follow the main axis of advance and hope for the best. We caught " F " Troop in a wadi alongside the main track, and just in time, too, as they were preparing to move off again. So away we went once more, following a tortuous course over the undulating country, and every now and then we came to a halt while reconnaissance was being carried out ahead. During one of these halts George and I spotted some abandoned Italian vehicles, so, being more or less free-lances, went across to investigate. After a good look through all the gear left by the enemy, we found that there was nothing much of use, and came away with very little to show for our " ratting " expedition. However, we acquired a couple of Iti Tommy-guns complete with ammunition, and I possessed myself of a nice solid leather despatch rider's satchel, which made an admirable writing case. Finally the guns went into action behind a steep hill, and from directions given by the Troop

Commander, who was forward in the Honey tank, were soon hurling shells over the ridge towards the enemy rearguard. The only return fire encountered was the occasional whistle of anti-tank shells as they cleared the hill in front, bounced not far from us, and then screamed away into the distance. This was most disconcerting to some Italian prisoners being marched away behind us, and many of them broke into a run in an attempt to get as far as they could from the danger zone. In the open on the flat to our rear some wandering Arabs had pitched their camp, and they couldn't have picked a worse spot. On hearing the bark of a heavy enemy gun we looked round to see where the shell would land, and in a matter of seconds the ground alongside one of the tents erupted like a volcano. Through the glasses I could see the Arabs running as fast as their legs could carry them, and flat on the ground lay a donkey whose working days were over. Shortly afterwards a few more shells landed in the proximity of the little encampment, but by that time the inhabitants had removed themselves far from the danger area. However, it was only a temporary evacuation, and as soon as the battle moved on they would return to their tents and probably live on donkey meat for some time. That night we remained in the lee of the hill

with our K.D.G. friends, and as it had been a long and tiring day we were ready for some rest.

It was my turn for prowler guard, and at some unearthly hour in the morning I was wakened by some hopeful who wanted to climb into his blankets for a while. I couldn't blame him, either, as it was bitterly cold, but my shift was only a short one, and I roused everybody at 5 o'clock. In the greying dawn the K.D.G. Squadron, followed closely by the guns of the troop, moved off, but three of us, George, the Sergeant-major, and myself, were left behind to contact a three-ton ammunition vehicle. Our hungry guns were running short of "fodder." We waited and waited for it to turn up, and in the meantime the whole division rolled on past us in hot pursuit of the fleeing enemy. Trying to locate the particular truck we wanted amongst hundreds of similar ones tearing by was like looking for a needle in a haystack, but it wasn't until the afternoon that we gave it up as a bad job and followed the axis of advance. Many Italian trucks, packed with troops, passed us going the other way, and in most cases the Italians were quite happy to be travelling on their own without any escort. They were surrendering in large droves, and it simply amounted to mass desertion. After overhauling all the units which

had left us behind in the morning, we eventually reached our " B " Echelon in the late afternoon, to find the object of our search already there and waiting for a guide to lead it to " F " Troop. Our Sergeant-major then took the much-needed ammunition forward to the guns, while George and I stayed with the gun-tractor (quod) F2, which had come back to " B " Echelon with a defective gearbox. It was very fortunate that a nearby truck, abandoned by the Germans in their headlong flight, was of the same make as the quod and the gearboxes identical, and the replacement was installed before dark. Instead of going on that night with the possibility of getting lost in the dark, we decided to wait until daylight, when we would be able to see where we were going.

In the morning, when shaking some of the superfluous dust out of my blankets, a big ugly black scorpion dropped out, and I wondered just how long he had been sleeping with me. Not a nice bed-fellow at all, and I quickly despatched him. Some " Tommies " had given us a piece of mutton off a sheep they killed, so we decided to have a change, and cooked it over a petrol sand fire for breakfast. The meat was charred on the outside, nicely cooked halfway through, nearly raw in the centre, and tasted a little of benzine, but it was still eaten with relish, as fresh meat, and mutton at that, was

considered a rare treat. Our snack completed, we got moving, and soon found that the whole British force was giving full chase to the fleeing Axis troops. The country proved more interesting the further north we went, with many cultivated fields, green trees, and numerous small flowers of varied hues growing wild on the plain. During the morning we bumped over the single-track Maknassi railway and then went on, through acre upon acre of thickly-grown barley fields. The tall, strong stalks and the ears fairly bursting with grain boded well for a good crop, but here and there it had been struck by some black blight and rendered useless. To preserve the fields of grain, a single track had been used by the advancing forces, and, being only some twenty feet wide, very little of the crop was destroyed. I doubt whether the Germans would have shown as much consideration. About noon we came upon the Twenty-first New Zealand Battalion lunching in the shade of olive trees, so thought it would be a good idea to have a bite to eat ourselves. George made inquiries for his brother, who was in that particular unit, but apparently he was away elsewhere. Our rickety-looking vehicle, laden with all sorts of spare truck parts and tyres, evoked much mirth from the infantry boys as they casually enquired from what junk pile we had acquired

it. However, it hadn't given any trouble up to date, and we were quite happy, and one couldn't always go by appearances. After lunch we moved on again and finally caught up with the R.H.Q. of the K.D.G.'s, where we were informed that the troop was out well forward playing hide and seek with enemy tanks. Consequently we had to wait until evening before permission was given for us to go out and rejoin the guns, and during our stay with the R.H.Q. the Germans launched an abortive armoured attack on our left flank. They certainly caused some damage, and one or two vehicles burst into flames, but the British tanks were too strong, and repulsed them easily. That night, after rejoining "F" Troop, we withdrew to laager with a K.D.G. squadron some miles from the main British force. Literally, it was very bright that night. The Luftwaffe, in a desperate endeavour to stem the rapid advance of the victorious Eighth Army, flung in an all-out attack, the like of which we had not seen for a long time. All through the night, as parachute flares drifted slowly down to earth, the whole scene was bathed in a ghostly yellow light. The constant beat of aeroplane engines filled the air, and the frequent screech of falling bombs could plainly be heard, and, although some distance from us, we could hear their shattering roar

as they exploded. Showers of white-hot splinters flying through the air reminded me of the Guy Fawkes "sparklers" of my childhood days, but, no matter how pretty it seemed, there was always the thought of the deadly havoc wrought by a well-aimed bomb. Here and there an odd truck was hit and set on fire, and in the distance they glowed, a red ball of fire, every now and then spewing flame and metal heavenwards as petrol or ammunition exploded. It was an awesome sight, and with much relief we watched the first grey streaks of dawn appear in the sky.

When morning came the driver of one of the quods (F3) found that he had some broken springs, so once again the troop moved on while we stayed behind. It was becoming a habit!! We could do with something to eat, so I made some breakfast while George got to work on F3. I fried some soya links, which in reality were sausages made of pork and soya beans, and to eat they resembled a mouthful of sawdust. Still, it was something to keep us going, and, washed down with a good cup of tea, they weren't so bad. To fill in some time, I gave the Breda a thorough clean, but shortly afterwards undid all my good work when I opened up on a formation of Messerschmitt fighter-bombers which staged a raid about a mile away. The area they bombed was devoid

of transport, but small mounds covered with scrub probably resembled camouflaged vehicles from the air, and thus misled the German pilots. It was good to see them waste their precious bombs like that. When F3 was ready for the road we went on, passing over very rough country and through many extensive olive groves. The olive trees were planted in long straight lines, some of them a mile long, and we travelled over the soft, dusty earth between the rows, with engines flat out in low gear so that we wouldn't get stuck. Eventually we transferred on to a good road leading north towards Sfax, and as it was marked with the familiar diamond sign we followed it with assurance. In columns stretching for miles, vehicles moved along nose to tail, and we were again fortunate that air supremacy was at least ours in the daytime. We, in our two trucks, wound our way in and out of the columns, but it was some time before we got away into the lead and had the road practically to ourselves. On coming up to the guns, we found them in action just off the side of the road, but only firing spasmodically, as targets were scarce. The wagon-lines were across the other side of the road in a small orchard, and there we awaited the next move. I could hear a loud rumbling behind us, and the next minute several huge Sherman tanks appeared from

under the olive trees, lurched past us with engines roaring, and sped down the road. Their officers waved and yelled out to us as they went by, but we couldn't hear a thing above the scream of high-powered motors.

Then came the order: "Prepare to move," so the quods went across the road, picked up their respective guns, and then lined up in the correct order of march. Away we went down the road, and after passing through the tiny village of La Hencha, turned east and headed towards the coast. It appears that our job was to cut off a small enemy force between the British forces in the coastal sector and ourselves, but he was too quick for us and got away. Sfax was reported clear of the enemy and in our hands, and the K.D.G.'s were keenly disappointed that they hadn't been able to get into the town first, but, as will be seen, their turn was to come later. The enemy having escaped from our intended trap, we turned into a large plantation of olives and bivouacked for the night. Later in the evening we listened to the news from the B.B.C. in England when they announced the fall of Sfax, and there we were, only a matter of ten miles or so from the place. We were making rapid progress up into northern Tunisia, and up till then enemy resistance showed no signs of stiffening.

CHAPTER VII

THE FALL OF SOUSSE

At dawn on April 11th, after an undisturbed night's rest, we left our bivouac under the sheltering olive trees and moved towards a nearby village, where we stayed until well on in the morning. It was a beautiful day with brilliant sunshine and not a cloud in the sky, so while awaiting further orders, we made our breakfast and then lay down to bask in the warm rays of the sun. On receiving the order to move on, we mounted our vehicles and were soon bowling along the dusty country road towards the tumble-down village of La Hencha. It consisted only of a few dirty buildings on both sides of the road, and from there we turned right and headed up the main highway north, but were suddenly brought to a halt after going a mile or two. Where it ran across a large salt marsh, the retreating Germans had blown a huge piece out of the road, and with a big crater of soft mud confronting us, it was impossible to go any further. New Zealand engineers were already on the job of repair work, but informed us that it would be some hours before the way was clear for further traffic, so we turned round and went back through La Hencha. Proceeding south, we travelled along the

smooth bitumen road for a mile or two, and then swung off into the rough open country to begin our detour to encompass the impassable natural barrier formed by the salt marsh.

It was interesting country with fields of grain rustling in the breeze, the ever-present olive groves and clumps of spiny cactus, and acres of many-coloured wild flowers. What a pleasant contrast to the desert I thought, as I gazed on the scene before me, with here and there, the red blaze of poppies showing up clearly against their green background. Although war seemed so far away in those peaceful fields with their waving grass and nodding flowers, the little patches of poppies when seen in the distance reminded one somehow of the blood that was shed in that mortal struggle. The many hues of the tiny flowers varied beyond description, and with deep reds, pinks, blues, yellows, and in fact, all shades of the rainbow, created a veritable riot of colour. With spring so obviously in the air, it seemed such a pity that the unfeeling wheels of war should crush the life out of so much of that evidence of a change in season, but human strife shows no consideration for the beautiful things in this topsy-turvy world of ours. The going was extremely rough at times, as we were using an old cart track which wound its

way up hill and down dale, and was deeply rutted by the previous winter rains.

On halting for lunch about noon, several natives clustered around us, and many of them looked as though they and their dirty clothes could do with a really good scrubbing. From the voluminous folds of their flowing robes, numerous eggs appeared and later some chickens were produced, so we soon began to haggle over the price of these delicacies. A native would sell his soul for an army blanket, but ours weren't for sale. For an old Italian ground-sheet we had on the truck, George and I got a few eggs, while the boys on M5 finished up with a couple of dozen, as well as two nice fat chickens. Des, one of our line signallers, quickly wrung the neck of one, and in a matter of minutes it was plucked and in the stewing pot, exuding a delightful odour as it boiled away merrily. The smell fairly made my mouth water, and I could see our signallers licking their chops in anticipation. However, we unfortunately had to move off shortly afterwards, and they had to throw pot and all on to their vehicle and finish their cooking later on. To the leg of the other chicken a long string was tied and it seemed quite happy to become part of "F" Troop's establishment. In the days to come it proved rather a prolific layer and no longer needed a string to keep it from

straying, but the boys eventually had to get rid of it and it too ended up in the cooking pot. The boys certainly had a change from the monotonous army diet, and we were quite envious.

As we went on keeping to a formed track running between rows of cactus hedge, an altogether unexpected sight met our eyes. It was the massive ruins of a huge amphitheatre, built by the Romans centuries ago, that stood near the little village of El Djem * which lay on the main road north. It brought to mind pictures I had seen of the Colosseum in Rome, and I could imagine it, hundred of years before, packed with spectators as they watched the bloody games in the arena. Within sight of this towering edifice, one of our troop quods suffered a petrol blockage, and although we were able to view the impressive sight from a distance, it was a pity that time didn't permit

*When this region (formerly called Thysdrus) was thickly populated, its central position made it an ideal site for the celebration of public feasts and games. From far and wide visitors flocked to the huge amphitheatre supposed to have been planned, if not built, by Gordian the elder, when he was proclaimed Emperor of the city of Thysdrus. This is the best preserved Colosseum left to posterity by the ancients, not even excepting that at Pompeii itself. It was also the meeting place for chiefs of the southern Tunisian tribes, when they gathered there in 1881 and decided to initiate a general uprising against the French. According to the measurements of an expert, the amphitheatre of Thysdrus was probably the vastest of the ancient Roman world. However, it had gradually fallen to ruin with the passing of time, and some of the material was used by nearby natives in the construction of their miserable dwellings.

a closer inspection. The quod fixed, we moved on again, finally reaching the main road and passing through El Djem, where the inhabitants flocked to the roadside to wave us on. Two French gendarmes stood at the side of the road, and with broad smiles on their sun-tanned faces, gave us the "V" sign as we passed by. The detour around the marsh was successfully completed, and once on the good bitumen road again, we moved along at a smart pace. Strung out along the highway, Honey tanks of the New Zealand Divisional Cavalry thundered on, their whirring tracks creating a bedlam of sound, and slowly we overhauled them one by one. On topping a rise in the road, we saw before us a broad green valley, dotted here and there with little groves of trees, and away to our left, the placid waters of the big Sebka-el-Hani lake gleamed, as they reflected the golden rays of the setting sun. Soon we dropped down into the valley, and in company with Y3 which had come back to see how we were getting along, speeded on our way. On coming to some cross-roads, after some deliberation we decided to take the right fork, so swung on to the dusty metal road so like country roads in our homeland, and headed east. Before long we neared the outskirts of a village, and as there were no other British troops in sight, we made our way

cautiously forward. On arriving at the square in the centre of the village we saw a K.D.G. armoured car, so knew that our guns couldn't be far away, although we still had to wait there until advised of the exact direction in which to go.

What a reception we received in Djemmal!! The whole population, French, Jewish, and native, gathered in the village square to greet us, and to see what these men of the victorious Eighth Army looked like. They were wildly excited, and chattered amongst themselves as they examined our equipment, and, on recognizing the little Breda behind our truck, derived much laughter from the thought of it being used against its original owners. The natives were dressed in their customary flowing garments, and wore either skull caps or turbans on their heads, while those of European origin wore the conventional suits (perhaps somewhat bedraggled) of civilisation. Some of the gaily-dressed Frenchwomen were very pretty indeed, and one rather striking girl offered us a cup of steaming hot coffee, filling it up again as soon as we had emptied it. They were all like that, and couldn't do enough for us, so happy were they in their freedom from Nazi domination. As the enemy had only evacuated the village a few hours previously, the change-over was rather

sudden for the people, but it was obvious that they hated the Germans like poison, and were glad to see the last of them. One or two of the village folk could speak broken English, and they were very much in demand, as we tried to gain useful information, and the people tried to ask us innumerable questions. The most popular question of all was: "When will you be in Tunis?" I'm afraid we couldn't give them any definite answer, but assured them that Tunis would be in British hands before very long. On leaving Djemmal, the Germans had practically stripped the place of all its food and drink, and out of the meagre supplies left them the people pressed us to take what we wanted. It was all very touching, and, without doubt, theirs was a genuine welcome. Through an interpreter I got talking to a Jew, who wore a yellow cloth star on the lapel of his coat, and this was his short story: "Each one of us Jews has a star to identify him as being of our nationality, and if we had dared to remove it while the Germans were in occupation the penalty would have been death. The Nazis forced us to work on the docks in Sousse, and during that time we toiled long hours and were given very little to eat. When your bombers came over to blast the shipping in Sousse harbour we were evacuated here to Djemmal, as it was impossible to work under

such a rain of bombs, and casualties mounted steadily. We are more than grateful to the British for liberating us from the Nazi yoke, as no longer will we be forced to labour under the brutal Germans. We thank you from the bottom of our hearts, and will never forget what you have done." It was a pleasure to see the relief mirrored in their faces, and without any more ado they began to rip off their stars of identification. In the meantime George had been given a couple of loaves of fresh wholemeal bread and a little wine, and we didn't want to take away any more than that, as the villagers themselves had very little to come and go on. Much as we would have liked to stay there indefinitely and enjoy ourselves, there was a war to be fought, and, amid much cheering and clapping of hands, we wound our way through the street and moved north. Before long we came up on "F" Troop bivouacked under the usual olive trees, and there settled down for the night, some fifteen miles from the port of Sousse. In the evening several of the boys went up to Djemmal, about two miles away, and were given a good time, but I decided to get some rest, and crawled into my blankets early.

When the new day dawned the road was reported clear, so away went the squadron of armoured cars, closely followed by the guns

of "F" Troop. One of our ammunition quods (F5) refused to start, so once more George and I were left in the lurch. It didn't take our mechanic long to fix the trouble, and then we moved out on to the main road and sped along towards Sousse. Soon we came to the spot where our little force had detoured to by-pass a small bridge blown up by the Germans, and they were busily engaged in getting across a muddy creek. It looked an awkward place to cross, so when our turn came George gave our truck the "gun," and we tore through the stream, throwing out a spray of slimy black mud from under our spinning wheels. Once all the vehicles were on solid ground again, we returned to the main road, and, as the K.D.G.'s wanted the honour of being the first in the town, we didn't waste any time. Sousse soon came into view, its tall, white buildings shining in the light of the early-morning sun, while on our right lay the vivid blue waters of the sea. We passed several small groups of smiling-faced French people as they cheerily waved us on and held up their fingers to form a V. Without any opposition, we roared into Sousse, and down by the waterfront the place resembled a ghost town. On getting the order to halt and boil the billy, all engines were switched off, and in the uncanny silence which followed one

could almost have heard a pin drop. However, the still air soon resounded to the chopping of wood as the business of preparing breakfast got under way and the clumping of heavy boots as men began to move about. It was 8 o'clock in the morning, and apparently we were first to occupy the town, as the Mayor formally surrendered to the commander of our K.D.G. Squadron and imparted some useful information. It appears that we were half an hour in advance of the New Zealand Divisional Cavalry, who entered the town at a different point. While waiting for the billy to boil, I had a look round the place, and what a wreck it was!! The main street was just a shambles, with hardly a building standing, and, while looking at the destruction wrought by high-explosive bombs, I thought to myself: " This is what parts of London must have looked like during the blitz of 1940." The shops and stores were reduced to mere heaps of rubble, while festoons of reinforced concrete hung at grotesque angles from the pillars still standing. Further back from the waterfront, which had been the target for hundreds of Allied bombers, the town had not fared so badly, and most of the fine buildings were undamaged except for the scars of bomb splinters. Although we thought the main street area uninhabited, one old woman came from some-

where in that scene of destruction, and, with tears in her eyes, started gabbling excitedly to us in French. I suppose she just came out to bid us welcome, and she quickly disappeared amongst the wreckage again. To a couple of gendarmes who came down to us on their bicycles I tried to make myself understood, and, although my schoolboy French seemed a bit beyond them, they apparently recognised pieces of the conversation here and there. From them we learned that the Germans had withdrawn from Sousse the previous night, and were now established in the undulating country a few miles the other side of the town. It was the job of these gendarmes, in conjunction with the British military police, to maintain law and order in the occupied town.

Our breakfast completed, the order came down the line to move off, so we mounted up and set out in column of route. On reaching the outskirts of the town, we could hardly realize that there was a war on, so gay was the scene. Wildly waving the flags of the Allies (the tricolour was most predominant), scores of brightly-dressed women lined the road, while elderly men acted like young children and shouted at the tops of their voices. Excitedly they cheered us on, and the tiny tots were lifted shoulder high so that they wouldn't miss anything as we advanced slowly forward.

Small boys clambered up the sides of our barely-moving vehicle until we had about half a dozen aboard who seemed quite content to remain with us indefinitely. However, we had to be firm and tell them to get off " toute suite " before we ran into any trouble, but we had to roar at them to get them to shift. They were like children the world over, always looking for some new experience, but it would have been decidedly awkward if we had suddenly gone into action with several small boys on our hands. Flowers and the branches of trees were showered on us, until the truck looked like a mobile florist's shop. Soon we came to a small village, and again the people were out in full force to welcome us with flowers and also beautiful fresh green vegetables with which to supplement our rations. Then it happened!! The harsh chattering of machine-guns filled the air as the Germans opened fire on our leading patrol cars, and " F " Troop immediately swung off the road into the protecting screen of a plantation of trees. The guns were soon in action and hurling shells on to enemy positions about two miles away, while the wagon-lines were established right alongside the cross-roads in the centre of the village. Near-by were several dusty little lanes between rows of cactus, and some of our vehicles dispersed down these to conceal themselves behind the

prickly hedges. The villagers still clustered round us, but we could see them flinch every time our guns fired, and one by one they began to make themselves scarce. While awaiting further orders, an elderly woman came across the road and asked George and me if we would like a drink, and we didn't say no to that. As there was nothing for us to do in the meantime, it was decided to go across one at a time, and off George went for his drink. He was back a few minutes later with a very sour expression on his face, and shortly afterwards I knew the reason why. Out of a tall bottle of pale yellow liquid a small glass was poured, and after one gulp of the fiery stuff, which nearly took the skin off my throat, I realized why George had turned up his nose at it. I didn't want to offend the people who had been so kind, so downed the remainder of the glass, and, when my throat once more returned to normal, the effects were quite pleasant. Later on I decided to remove my three-day-old whiskers, and had barely completed my shave in front of an admiring audience when shells suddenly began to whistle over our heads and burst on the road beyond. It was too much for the village folk gathered round our truck, and the next minute we had the place to ourselves. We lay flat on the ground behind an old mud wall while shells screamed overhead,

and as a few dropped short we could hear the shrapnel smacking through the pulpy cactus leaves. I could have sworn one particular shell had my number on it, as it screeched down right on top of us, but it dropped a little short and went crashing through the wall of a nearby hovel. Luckily, it failed to explode, and apart from a large hole torn in the mud bricks of the hut, no damage was done. It seemed an age before the shelling ceased, but in reality it was only a matter of ten minutes or so, and when it was all over we stood up and took stock of things. There wasn't a soul in sight, and the village was swathed in a pall of dirty grey smoke, as the light breeze carried it up the road. A couple of shell craters a mere twenty-five yards away made us marvel at our narrow escape from injury, and we wondered if everyone had been as lucky as us. To make sure, we had a good look all over the village, but there were no casualties that we could see, and most of the people had fled to the seashore not far distant. In case the enemy should decide to plaster the crossroads again, we moved away from the danger zone and went down a nearby lane for shelter. It wasn't long before some villagers began to reappear, and they brought us more green vegetables, wine, bread, and eggs, until our truck was provisioned for a couple of days to come. Shortly

I beheld a strange sight. Up the lane came George, a civilian, and three Italians carrying rifles. Apparently the Italians had been hiding in the cactus somewhere waiting for the tide of battle to pass over them, and, on finding them there, the Frenchman decided to put them out of harm's way. They were overjoyed at being taken prisoner, and when I busied myself in smashing their rifles to pieces they laughed and chattered amongst themselves and thought it a huge joke. I couldn't quite fathom why they were carrying arms and also wearing the armbands of the Red Cross at the same time, but that was the sort of thing the Italians did. A few odd shells were still crashing among the cactus plantations on the other side of the highway, and one landed fair and square in the back of our signallers' truck (M5), where it was parked in a small lane. Luckily, the crew was away at the time, but the shell made a terrific mess of all their gear. There were bits of blanket, chunks of torn metal, punctured water tins leaking everywhere, and, with the cab and dashboard badly blown about, it was a wonder the vehicle was of any further use. After about half an hour's work, George had it going and ready for the road again.

While we were maintaining contact with this enemy rearguard, the main British force was steadily coming up behind, and during the

afternoon more and more guns came into action in our sector. The time came when we were ordered to withdraw, as the enemy was fully engaged there, and we had a job to do elsewhere. Accordingly, the troop packed up, and then, with the K.D.G.'s in the lead, made a dash through the village under the very eyes of German O.P.'s. He must have been fully occupied, as we ran the gauntlet without a shot being fired at us. For some time we remained in laager in a large olive grove, and as there was a well nearby the boys replenished their stocks of water. On leaving the shelter of the trees, we tailed along behind our leading armoured cars and passed through Sousse* before turning west and heading into the setting sun. The townspeople were still

*Of Phoenician origin, Sousse is the port of Kairouan, that principal city and military centre of the interior. In the time of the Romans, Sousse was known as Hadrumitum, and was the chief town of the province of Byzacenae. Then it was of great value from the military standpoint, and also being a wealthy city, it was the subject of many assaults by foreign invaders. Repeatedly Hadrumitum was destroyed by successive Arab, Spanish and French attacks, and it became one heap of ruins after another. The unlucky city was again unfortunate in that the Second World War had reduced part of the town to ruins once more. Like other towns of Eastern Tunisia, the modern Sousse is surrounded by huge ramparts flanked by towers, and at the southern end where the main road enters it, stands a fort or "kasbah." Olive trees could be counted by the million around Sousse, and before the war, there were large exports of oil to France for the manufacture of soap. The greater part of the circular port of the Carthaginians can scarcely be recognised, as most of those ancient works have been pulled down and converted into an esplanade.

lining the streets, waving flags and gazing with wonder at the might of the Eighth Army as it rolled on past them. I still marvel at the number of British flags possessed by the French people, and they must have had them hidden away for that great day which had at last arrived. It was encouraging to receive such a welcome, and made us feel as though we had done something really worth while.

The road westwards from Sousse possessed a beautiful surface, and no time was lost in covering several miles, but on turning off into the open country our progress quickly slowed down. For over an hour we bumped and jolted over the uneven ground, and it was a welcome relief when we at last reached our bivouac area for the night. However, there was no rest for George and me, as we were to contact a three-ton load of ammunition in Sousse and bring it out to the troop without delay. After all the firing during the day, our supply of shells was nearly exhausted. We met the three-tonner all right, and, while its crew prepared themselves a bite to eat, I went on a tour of the French military barracks nearby. The buildings had been used by the enemy as a dumping ground for captured British equipment, and a whisper went round that there were some Bren guns available in working order. Automatic weapons are handy at any

time, so I dashed into the barracks and made a bee-line for the particular building in which the machine-guns were supposed to be. I was just too late, as many Kiwis got there before me, and all that were left were a few guns too far gone with rust to be of any further use. On the return journey to the troop I rode in the ammunition truck, as George had gone on to our R.H.Q. to see if he could get some blankets for the personnel of M5. It was a nasty trip in the pitch darkness, as we bounced all over the countryside, and, to make it more awkward still, there was a lot of traffic going in the opposite direction. At one place we had to detour round a Fifth Field Regiment quod which had run too close to a bank and over-turned, and without lights it was no easy job to pull the tractor right side up. However, we eventually reached " F " Troop safe and sound, and, having had the foresight to remove my blankets from George's truck, I was able to bed down as soon as I had reported the arrival of the ammunition.

Our advance up the broad Tunisian plains was going very well indeed, and that night we were only about seventy-five miles from Tunis itself.

CHAPTER VIII.

ON TO ENFIDAVILLE.

At " first light " on the morning of the 13th we were roused from our sleep, and, after a quickly-prepared breakfast, the troop once more got under way. The quod F5 again played up and wouldn't start, so George and I stayed behind with the driver, and our mechanic got straight on to the job of rectifying the fault. It wasn't long before we had some visitors, and a couple of French lads who could speak a little English were very interested in our vehicles and equipment. They were both about twenty years old, and well bronzed by their open-air life. On asking them if there was a place handy where I could get some bread and eggs, they replied that there was a village just over the hill, and offered to lead me there. I thought it was a good idea, and, after telling George that I wouldn't be long, we set out across country at a smart pace. On coming to the top of a small hill, I could see the village nestling in a green valley some distance away. About two and a-half miles constituted their " just over the hill," and then I realized that, unlike us, they were unused to travelling in vehicles, and the distance we walked was a mere nothing to them. As soon as we came in sight, some

women, busily engaged in filling their stone jars at the local water point, hurriedly gathered up their skirts and made off into the village. On entering the place I encountered the stony stares of the inhabitants, as they seemed to resent my intrusion, and it appears that, being the first British soldier to make his appearance there, they didn't quite know what to make of me. However, my two French companions could speak the particular dialect of Arabic like natives, and, with many gesticulations to emphasise their words, soon explained the situation to the villagers. I was introduced to the old grey-haired village chief, who seemed a very decent sort, and was then taken through the narrow, winding streets to the bakehouse. The delicious smell of freshly-baked bread assailed me as I entered the door, and I soon arranged for the purchase of four loaves at four francs apiece. Unlike the French, the Arabs weren't giving anything away, but, being only about fivepence a loaf in British currency, the beautiful brown wholemeal bread was quite cheap. At a reasonable price I also bought two dozen eggs, and while waiting for them to be collected from the various vendors I remained in the village square. Dirty little boys played in the filth on the ground, and I wondered how it was that they could be born and live to grow up under

such conditions without dying at some early stage from one of the many diseases rampant among the native community. My gorge rose at the sight of the numerous features ravaged by disease, and I couldn't imagine the afflicted ones deriving much pleasure from their earthly existence. Eventually all my purchases were made and paid for, so, with the loan of a basket in which to carry them, we set off on the return journey. It was a relief to breathe the fresh country air after the pollution of that filthy place, and as we walked swiftly along the narrow bridle path I saw that the women had returned to the watering-place and no longer took any notice of us. I had been away longer than I expected, and hoped that George wasn't impatiently awaiting me, but I needn't have worried, as he was still working on the obstinate quod when we arrived back. Y3 was also there, as Mac, our left section commander, had come back from the troop to see how we were getting along, and also to convey some message to our R.H.Q., which was still in the region of Sousse. We towed that quod up and down the track in an attempt to start it, but all our efforts were in vain, and in the end it was decided to leave it there, where it would be picked up later by our " B " Echelon as the rest of the regiment came through.

Y3 then went on towards Sousse to contact R.H.Q., and it wasn't until the late afternoon that George and I got away to see if we could catch up with the troop before darkness fell. For several miles the dusty track followed a railway line running westwards, and then we came to a fork, one branch going straight ahead and the other turning right into the open country beyond. Both forks had recently been used by traffic, and it was impossible to tell which one had been taken by our guns, so we decided to stop near a tiny railway station and wait there for Y3 to come along and show us the way. We had only been there a minute when the stationmaster and all his family came out to have a look at us, and the girls, in their gay dresses, made a pretty picture. Not one of them could speak English, but by signs and my poor command of their tongue we tried to convey to them that our water supply needed replenishing. One of the girls immediately ran into the house, and in a minute or so came back with two glasses of beautifully clear water. That was all very well, but we wanted to fill our water tins, and, after showing them one of the empty containers, they suddenly realized what we were after. "Mais certainement"; of course we could fill them; and one of the girls quickly led me to the household well. Situated in the

middle of the verandah in front of the house, it was covered with a neatly-fitting square flag-stone, which the girl soon removed, to expose the dark, spacious interior of the deep well. To raise the water, a tin was tied to a length of rope and dropped into the depths, and it was soon obvious that there was quite a knack in bringing the bucket up full each time. I was fairly proficient by the time all the tins were full, and then I dumped them on the truck, and that was our supply for the next few days. In the family group were two small boys not yet in their teens who were very interested in all our belongings, and my field-glasses were a continual source of wonderment to them. They couldn't quite fathom why the distant scene was brought so close, and many were the exclamations of surprise as they surveyed the surrounding countryside. In fact, they got somewhat heated over whose turn it was to look through them, arguing fiercely in their shrill, piping voices, and I think it was only the stern words from their father that prevented them from coming to blows. Children are the same the world over, whether they be French, English, or any other nationality. Y3 still hadn't turned up, so we thought it a good idea to get something to eat while the opportunity offered. Poached eggs didn't take long to prepare, and, together with fresh

bread, margarine, and jam, we partook of a tasty little meal. With eyes like saucers, the little boys watched us eat, so we gave each of them a piece of bread thickly spread with margarine and jam, and saw the joy written on their faces as they tasted the unusual flavour. As we were washing down our snack with a good hot cup of tea, a cloud of dust bore down the track, and, with a screeching of brakes, Y3 pulled up alongside us. In a minute or two we were ready to move, and on reaching the fork ahead we swung north and struck out across the open country.

With almost a day's start, the troop had certainly left us well behind, as we travelled until it was nearly dark and there was still no sign of our guns. The broad plain was devoid of cultivation and consisted mainly of stunted dull-green shrubs which grew in profusion, and as our two vehicles were the only ones in sight, we proceeded cautiously and with some apprehension. The light was failing fast and at any time we were prepared to run into enemy patrols, but we learnt shortly afterwards that our fears were unfounded. Soon after skirting the edge of a large lake, Sebka Kebira, the smooth waters of which gleamed like blued steel in the evening twilight, we struck the main highway running north from Kairouan. Three dark-skinned natives

stood on the corner, so to the best of our ability, we made enquiries from them as to what lay ahead. We found that Enfidaville itself was another 21 kilometres further on, and with dramatic gestures, they led us to believe that numerous British guns had already gone some distance up the main road, although Enfidaville itself was still in enemy hands. We took their word and moved on to the tar-seal, proceeding slowly forward as it was then completely dark. Soon we came upon an English Anti-tank regiment bivouacked in an olive grove alongside the highway, so asked them if they had seen any Kiwi 25-pounders pass by, and sure enough they had. After ascertaining the right track through the barley fields we moved slowly over the rocky country, and like homing pigeons ran straight into our guns as they were preparing to settle down for the night. We learnt that during our absence there had been two casualties on the guns while under intense shell-fire, but luckily neither of the boys sustained very serious wounds. George and I then recalled seeing an ambulance pass us while we were waiting at the railway station in the afternoon, but never dreamt at the time that two of our boys were being taken back to Sousse. That left Colin's No. 3 gun two men short, so I offered my services as an ammunition number until

such time as my assistance was no longer required. Little did I know then, that I was to see the campaign out on that gun. Accordingly I shifted most of my gear from George's truck to the quod F3, and bedded down with the rest of the gun-crew; Colin our sergeant, Tom, Doug, Jimmy, Bob, and "Slim" our driver.

In the early hours of the following morning I was on prowler guard and woke the boys at half past five, and several of them told me in no uncertain manner to go to hell. However, despite the usual grumbling about being dragged out of bed at such an ungodly hour, we were all up, had made our breakfast, and were packed up ready to move off at the appointed time. We travelled east towards the coast, and after crossing the railway running north, dispersed under the shade of some trees alongside the main road between Sousse and Enfidaville. We were there for the greater part of the morning, and during that time watched hundreds of vehicles and guns pouring up the road, to take up positions facing Enfidaville. Among many other New Zealand units, the guns of the Fifth and Sixth regiments rumbled past, and much good-natured chaff was exchanged as they went by. The Fifth was jokingly referred to as the "Following Fifth" and the Sixth as the "Sitting Sixth," while we very modestly called our-

selves the "Fighting Fourth." However, we had been given a special job to do, and in the latter stages of the campaign they were to do as much, if not more fighting, than we. During the morning we said goodbye to our friends of the King's Dragoon Guards as our work with them was completed, and we were indeed sorry to part with such a fine bunch of men. They all knew their jobs from A to Z, and their officers could read a map as easily as they could read a book, so it was no wonder we formed an efficient little scouting force. We had only suffered two casualties during our long trek with them, and fully appreciated their consideration in never exposing our gunners to any unnecessary risks. Later on, their Commanding Officer wrote a letter of appreciation to our Battery Commander, for our assistance to them in their reconnaissance, and we were greatly honoured by their praise of our work. It appears that forward reconnaissance was no longer practicable in our theatre of operations, so they were detached from the Eighth Army and moved further north to operate in conjunction with the British and American First Army.

Being free-lances no more, we were ordered to rejoin our regiment which had taken up a position on the flat country some miles south of Enfidaville. On the broad expanse

of meadowland behind a thick belt of trees and cactus were dozens of guns, carefully camouflaged to blend with their natural surroundings. It seemed a peaceful spot with larks singing in the sky, but the silence was suddenly broken by the ominous whistle of a shell as it whined through the air towards us. It burst a few hundred yards away, and a pall of grey smoke drifted slowly over the ground. Thereafter the enemy spasmodically dropped occasional shells in our area, but apart from keeping our nerves on edge all the time, they caused little or no damage. Away in the distance we could see the forbidding peaks of the blue hills beyond Enfidaville, and in that natural barrier the enemy had constructed strong defensive positions for his final stand in Tunisia. Little firing was done by our guns so we had plenty of time to ourselves, and usually whiled away the hours by playing cards or reading some of the tattered books that circulated through the troop. The game of bridge was very popular on our gun, and we usually managed to get a four to fill in an hour or so.

The front being more or less stabilized, a few German aircraft began to make their appearance, so George brought the Breda up from the wagon-lines and we parked it handy to our No. 3 gun. The little ack-ack weapon

hadn't been fired for some time, so after cleaning out the accumulated dust and oiling it thoroughly, I tried it out. The gun kept continually jamming, and it was only after a lot of trouble and with the aid of some more oil that I was able to get a complete pan of twelve shells away. "Amy," our gun position officer, didn't seem to like the idea of the gun being fired, even though it was pointed well up in the air, and in no uncertain manner ordered me to stop at once. I stopped!! While sitting on the edge of my trench, taking things easily, I suddenly heard a terrific roar behind me, and turned round to see a Messerchmitt hurtling down out of the sky with a Spitfire hard on its tail. The British pilot opened up on the German with all guns blazing, and it didn't seem to worry him one bit that his bullets were making the dust fly right on our gun position. He was probably too occupied with the job of shooting the German fighter out of the sky to worry about anything else. Suddenly the black-crossed fighter straightened out, and we last saw it skimming over the tree-tops and heading for home with the Spitfire still in hot pursuit. As the sun began to sink below the distant hills we were again attacked, but this time by millions of hungry mosquitoes thirsting for our blood. The air was literally full of the ravenous little brutes, and as fast

as we squashed them out of existence there were thousands more awaiting their turn. On going to bed, I tried burying myself head and all in the blankets, but it was too hot down there, and I frequently had to come up and cool off. That was the opportunity the "skeeters" were waiting for, and they dived to the attack by the score, buzzing in my ears and generally making sleep impossible. Everywhere I could hear the cursing of harassed men as they vainly attempted to protect themselves from the ravages of the thirsty insects. Even at dawn they still hung about greedily seeking new victims, and it took the warm rays of the early-morning sun to disperse them, thus giving us a rest, at least until evening. For weeks to follow we were bitten unmercifully, and were indeed fortunate that it wasn't the malaria season, and nobody in the troop contracted the disease.

Bob, one of the boys on our gun, had resurrected a German water container (popularly called a Jerrican), fitted with a small hose, so we strung it up on a pole to provide a makeshift shower. In turn we each stripped off for a good wash all over, and, as water was plentiful, we had no worries on that score. Quite a few of the boys came over from the other guns to partake of a welcome bath, as they too, wanted to feel fresh and clean for a

change. Soon our idleness was changed into activity, as digging parties were sent forward under the cover of darkness to dig in ammunition and construct gun-pits. Large holes were dug, boxes of shells and cartridges packed in, and then the whole lot was covered over with earth, stones, and scrub to make it indistinguishable from its immediate surroundings. We were rather proud of our work, and it would have been next to impossible to spot the concealed ammunition from the air, let alone the ground. In all, about four hundred rounds per gun were concealed on the position, and on the third night our 25-pounders were taken forward to be placed in pits constructed for our safety in the coming battle. In order to make a quicker job of it, a bulldozer came up and scooped out the holes in next to no time, thus saving us a lot of arduous spade work, although the sides and bottom had to be trimmed up. Lurching and roaring, it dipped its huge blade into the dark brown soil, and in one sweep shifted as much as would have taken us an hour to shovel by hand. We thought the terrific din created by the machine in operation would be sure to attract some shell-fire, but we remained unmolested while it worked away on our position. Later, however, when the bulldozer went further forward to dig more pits, the enemy located the sound

coming through the still night air, and accurate shelling caused a slight hold-up in the work. Our pits being completed, we eased the guns in and then proceeded to camouflage them. To handle camouflage nets in the pitch black of night is, to say the least, a bit awkward, and it took some considerable time to get them arranged correctly. Leaving two men on each gun to put the finishing touches on the camouflage when day dawned, we retired to a bivouac area and slept what was left of the night in a little barley field surrounded by a cactus hedge. We were wakened from our slumbers by a shattering roar directly overhead, and we could hear the ugly sound of flying splinters as they whined through the air and thudded into the ground. We waited in tense silence for some moments, and then one of the boys exclaimed: "I wonder what in the hell that was?" The still night air remained unbroken, so we gradually dropped off to sleep again, and found in the morning that a shell from a big 170 mm. gun just behind us had exploded prematurely.

I awoke in the early morning to the gentle patter of raindrops on my face, so lost no time in scrambling out of my blankets and putting them under cover. With a grey, overcast sky and the steady, drizzling rain, it promised to be a miserable day, so we were agreeably sur-

prised when the weather improved and cleared up later in the morning. A couple of hundred yards to our rear some " Tommies " were operating the captured German 170 mm. gun which had so rudely awakened us during the night, and every now and then it went off with a terrific roar. Someone dubbed it the " Scharnhorst," because it was big and German, and when that name was used amongst ourselves the gun was being referred to and not the pocket battleship. I went back to watch the gun in action, and was simply astounded at the size of the thing. The entire gun must have measured fully forty or fifty feet, and the huge barrel was as long as the whole of one of our 25-pounders. It took about five minutes to load and lay the weapon each time, and then, to fire it, one of the crew jumped into a trench and pulled the lengthy trigger lanyard from that reasonably safe spot. The noise was appalling, and half the countryside seemed to be obscured by smoke and dust as the 150lb shell screeched away on its message of destruction. That enormous gun could throw its weighty projectile a distance of eighteen miles, and how glad I was that somebody other than myself was on the receiving end. We sat on the top of our quod, and through field-glasses watched the shells exploding like bombs amongst enemy positions in the far-distant foothills.

After our evening meal we waited until dark and then moved out to the gun position, where we set to work unearthing our buried ammunition and preparing it for the forthcoming barrage. At the same time hundreds of Eighth Army gunners were doing the same thing, and the stage was being set for the next phase in the battle for Tunisia.

CHAPTER IX.

THE OFFENSIVE.

At 2300 hours on the night of Monday, April 19th, we commenced our barrage to cover the infantry attack against the strongly-held enemy line in the foothills across our front. The country for miles round was vividly lit up by the flashes of hundreds of guns as they roared defiance at the enemy, and the air was alive with the whistle of shells as they screeched away towards their targets. Away on our left the guns of the Fourth Indian Division were pounding furiously in support of their own infantry scaling the steep hills on their front, while far behind us we could hear the regular bellow of the "Scharnhorst" as it, too, made its contribution towards the common effort. We supported our New Zealand Fifth Brigade as they advanced across the open country, their objective being the rugged Takrouna feature surmounted by a small village, and its flanking slopes. Rising sheer from the plain below, this grim-looking eminence commanded an entire view of the flat country stretching away to the south, and if our men failed to capture it it meant that all our gun positions would become untenable. This feature was the scene of bitter hand-to-hand fighting but an heroic detachment of men from the

Maori Battalion scaled the precipitous cliffs and finally established themselves on the summit. Still the enemy held tenaciously to the village, and it wasn't until the evening of the 21st, after continual bombardment by our guns and a determined attack by our infantry, that he was forced to relinquish his hold. It was a costly business, but sheer courage in the face of great odds shattered the enemy's belief that his Takrouna fortress was impregnable. The men of our Sixth Brigade were better off, and had no trouble in taking the town of Enfidaville, which the Germans of the Ninetieth Light Division evacuated, offering little resistance.

All through the barrage I acted as the No. 1 of the gun in ramming the shells up the "spout," and also as the No. 2 in manipulating the breech. One by one the shells went up the barrel and away on their errand of annihilation, and gradually our pile of ammunition diminished. There was a slight breeze blowing towards us, filling the pit with the acrid smoke of burnt cordite, which made our eyes water and caused brief spasms of violent coughing. By the time we ceased firing I had rammed well over two hundred projectiles home, and, not being used to it, my left arm promised to be stiff and sore on the morrow. We were dog-tired, and the next best place

was bed, so, without bothering to undress, we clambered into our blankets for a few hours' rest.

Morning dawned with the smoke and dust of battle hanging low over the plain, and above the top of the small crest in front of us we could see the summit of Takrouna erupting like a miniature Vesuvius. Whoever was up there was getting a very rough time of it, we thought, as we watched the heavy shells bursting, and at times the peak was entirely hidden in a mantle of grey smoke.

We were kept busy all that day, and during the next week fired a great number of rounds from that position. Three of our guns were nicely hidden behind a small rise, but No. 4 was out on the open flat to the left, and had to rely on its camouflage for concealment. Apparently it must have been quite effective, as very few enemy missiles landed anywhere near us. One day, however, while he was ranging on to dispersed vehicles behind us, a few large shells dropped short and tore huge craters in the soft ground near our position. They were fired from a long distance, as we could hear them whistling through the air long before they reached us, and, on hitting the ground, they burst with a negligible splinter effect and emitted a huge cloud of dense black smoke.

Then the photographers came!! "F" Troop went all Hollywood, and the men of Nos. 1 and 2 guns became the "glamour boys" of the unit, and subject to much derisive laughter. It appears that the movie cameramen wanted a close-up of Kiwi gunners in action, and they certainly got a good one, as the boys were dressed in all sorts of odd clothes, some without shirts, and generally looking a rough lot. With a camera grinding away in rear of No. 1 gun, the boys really did their stuff, and pumped a shell over into the enemy's lines in proper gunnery style. While the movie experts were still on the position, several natives trotted through with their camels and donkeys, blithely heading towards the German lines, so they were pulled up while the cameramen gave them the "works." I would like to know what caption was put beneath that picture. The natives were then sent packing right back where they came from. The photographers' visit over, we settled down once more to the usual routine, although the "glamour boys" had many a joke cracked at their expense.

From No. 4 gun-pit we could see through field-glasses the enemy dug-in positions on the slopes of the distant hills, so each time a concentration was fired some of us went across to watch the result. With the numerous bursts

close together, it appeared as though a whole hillside came to life, but our view was quickly obscured by drifting smoke, which completely blotted out the target area. When one realizes that approximately a thousand shells fell on an area 1000 yards square, or perhaps less, in the space of a few minutes, one can guess as to the effectiveness of such concentrations. Dug in as they were, the enemy troops must have wondered which of those terrible rains of death would write their finish.

Our mosquito "friends" were still very plentiful, but later on Bob and I put up a bivouac tent which was equipped with netting, and were able to get an undisturbed sleep at night. Some of the pests still managed to get in somehow or other, but, being few in number, they could be effectively dealt with. We could hear their angry buzz outside the netting, and derived much pleasure from the thought of the mosquitoes missing their usual nightly fill of blood. Every night our bombers droned overhead on their way to targets in the hills, and we often watched the aerial display put on by the enemy anti-aircraft guns. Streaks of Breda tracer criss-crossed like tiny search-light beams, and higher up the bursts of heavy ack-ack shells showed up as momentary pin-points of light against the inky blackness of the sky. Once, when a British bomber fell to

earth for all the world like a giant fiery comet, we sincerely hoped that it would crash right on top of the gun responsible for its destruction. Exceptionally few of the hundreds of Allied bombers that went across nightly to bomb the enemy were lost, and I could imagine the Germans and Italians shivering in their trenches as they heard the steady roar of approaching aircraft. It is not at all pleasant to be bombed at night, and the screeching of falling bombs out of the black heavens is most nerve-wracking. Being bombed is a nasty business at any time, but I always felt a lot more comfortable if I could see the attacking 'planes and perhaps occupy my mind by firing a rifle or machine-gun at them.

Anzac Day, the 25th, was practically the same as any other, but, as if to mark it as a special occasion for us, our gun platform buckled badly and rendered the hand-brake useless. That put us out of action for some time, but we didn't object to a welcome spell, and it wasn't until evening that Harry, our troop artificer, had the gun ready to fire again. Harry, a man who saw service in the Great War, had passed the half-century mark, and was one of the oldest men in the ranks of the division. He certainly didn't look his age, and was very active, so it was no wonder he bluffed the army authorities on joining the New Zea-

land Expeditionary Force. His son often came over to our lines to see his father.

On Easter Monday "Amy" informed us that we were to be withdrawn from the line for a short spell, and the joyous expressions on the boys' faces denoted that it was welcome news. During the day we packed up everything in readiness for a fast move out of there, and in the gathering dusk the quods came up to take us away. After the guns were hauled out of the pits we moved slowly back to our rear wagon-lines well beyond the range of enemy guns, and by the time we arrived there it was pitch dark. Tom jumped down off the truck to give a hand in unhooking the gun, and, in so doing, twisted his knee badly, so it didn't look as though he would be with us much longer. In the morning his leg was worse, and he was evacuated to a casualty clearing station, and I was given his unenviable task of keeping a tally of all the ammunition used on our gun. It was some job to keep a record of all the ammunition handled, and, with wet cartridges, shells loaned to other guns, and so on, it nearly got me down at times, especially if working short-handed on the gun. That day was one of complete freedom, and trucks were provided to transport those who wished to go down to the coast a few miles away for a swim. Many of us, however, just took things

easily in the bivouac area, and lazed about in the brilliant sunshine. Our rest was rudely disturbed in the afternoon, when some of us had to go forward to our old gun position to pick up extra ammunition that had been left there.

As the sun was slowly sinking in the west we lined up in order of march and moved out on to the main road north. Travelling along this, we soon came to the town of Enfidaville, hidden amongst beautiful tall gum trees, many of which had been ruthlessly destroyed by the Germans to form a road block. The town appeared to have been a pretty little place before being caught in the maelstrom of human conflict, with its fine buildings and refreshing green trees, but war had left only shattered houses and blackened ruins in its wake. We swung through the streets littered with rubble and jagged shell splinters, and proceeded along a narrow, dusty track beyond the town. Acre upon acre of olive trees stretched away into the distance, and, peeping above the tree-tops, the white dome of a tiny mosque was likened to a billiard ball on a green baize table. At first glance I thought we were in for a rough time, as the ground was pitted with hundreds of shell-holes, but then could have kicked myself for not realizing that the area had been in the path of the barrage on April 19th/20th. Our

new gun position was situated below a small rise some 4000 yards from the forward enemy outposts, and, although it seemed a bit close, there was no possibility of him spotting us. On being informed that a bulldozer would be up later to scoop out our gun-pits, we just marked them out and retired to our blankets to get what rest we could.

Long before dawn the bulldozer arrived on the position and immediately set to work scooping out the pits, after which we trimmed the sides, levelled the bottom off, and then rolled the guns in. As dawn was breaking by that time, they had to be concealed, so we erected the camouflage nets and then threw green grass on top to blend with the countryside. In the early-morning light we could see, far in front, the rugged peaks of the hills held by the enemy, while on our left the rocky summit of Takrouna stood out, stark against the background of a blue sky. Beyond preparing ammunition for a coming barrage, we had nothing else to do, so busied ourselves in making as comfortable "bivvies" as possible for the duration of our stay there. Mosquitoes were very much in evidence during the hours of darkness, and protection was needed, so Bob and I dug a hole about a foot deep and then erected our little tent over it. Nearly every evening, just on dusk, the enemy planted a few

small shells right on our position, so, to shield ourselves from splinters, we packed cartridge boxes filled with earth around our "home," and felt reasonably safe. Quite a number of enemy shells landed amongst the dispersed transport in the olive trees behind us, and the shrill whine as they passed overhead tended to keep our nerves on edge. There being a change in the plans of the Army Commander, the barrage didn't eventuate, but we still managed to get rid of our unboxed ammuniton, as O.P.'s were established, and our Troop Captain did plenty of shooting from his. As some of the targets were on very short ranges, a reduced charge was used, and, by standing behind the gun as it fired, we could see the projectiles disappearing into the distance like fast-moving cricket balls. From that position we fired a great number of rounds, and on one particularly busy day got away over three hundred and fifty shells. At the end of that hectic day we withdrew in the evening to a nice quiet spot well behind the lines, and bivouacked with our regimental "B" Echelon. It was certainly a welcome change to get away from the continual bark of guns for a while, although away in the distance we could hear the rumble of other British guns as they carried on the battle. The firmly-held Eighth Army line hadn't materially altered since the capture of

Takrouna and Enfidaville, but we were pulled out to do a job elsewhere.

For two undisturbed days we had a complete spell, our only work being to maintain our weapons and vehicles in readiness for the task that lay ahead. Our quod seemed to have accumulated a large amount of dust and rubbish, so we gave it a real good spring-clean too. Most of the time was filled in by reading books or playing cards in the shade of an awning stretched from the side of the vehicle, and the hours passed quickly away. The weather was rapidly changing into the heat of approaching summer, so any shelter from the burning rays of the sun was more than welcome. In the peaceful fields liberally bedaubed with the many colours of wild flowers, and with insects buzzing lazily through the hot still air, it was hard to realize that a battle was in progress not far away. However, we were continually reminded of that fact by the deep murmur of roaring guns in the distance. It may be hard to believe, but one night there the crew of F3 had a party!! While north of Enfidaville, Colin had won the toss for a bottle of gin, later repeating his performance, and another half-bottle came from somewhere to swell the supply. After long abstinence from liquor of any sort, two and a-half quarts of the spirit were quite sufficient to give the seven

of us a bright evening. We had a newcomer to the gun-crew, Alec who left New Zealand's shores with the Eighth reinforcements, and he was attached to us just in time for the party. It was a convivial little gathering, and strange to say, no ill effects were suffered.

Nearby, concealed amongst some huge clumps of cactus, were two slow-flying Stinson reconnaissance 'planes, which were used in low-altitude scouting over the enemy lines, and also in transporting high-ranking officers quickly from place to place. These 'planes, which cruised in the vicinity of eighty miles an hour and could land at thirty, looked like huge birds as they slowly glided to earth. No landing-ground had to be constructed for them and they could just use any comparatively level stretch of meadowland. Very handy little machines!!

After our rest from battle for a couple of days we moved west towards Pont du Fahs, where our job was to support the Free French Forces and the New Zealand Fifth Brigade in their offensive there. Left behind in the Enfidaville sector were the men of the Sixth Brigade infantry, together with the guns of the Sixth Field Regiment in support. Over the dusty track we travelled in broad daylight, but our movements were effectively concealed from the enemy by the high hills on our right

flank. Towards the end of the journey we came to a small native village of straw-thatched mud hovels, and the ground through and around the place was pock-marked with innumerable shell craters. It appears that there had been a spirited action fought there, before the village had finally been wrested from German hands. From there we moved out on to the open grassy plain, and on being informed that it was our halting place for the night, we lined up for the advance at "first light" next morning. Early the following day, after proceeding along the road towards Pont du Fahs for some miles, we turned off and traversed some very difficult country. There were deep green valleys to drop into, steep hills to climb, and in many places the ground was covered with large rocks. The terrain certainly wasn't meant for wheeled vehicles, with with engines screaming in low gear, we advanced steadily forward.

Eventually we reached our allotted position in a small valley, and there found our gun-pits already dug for us by British artillerymen who had formerly occupied the place. Although our pit was full of spent cartridges and general rubbish, it didn't take us long to clear it out and push the gun in. Camouflage was the next item on the programme, and to finish it off we strewed the net with plenty of the barley which

grew thickly around us. With the approach of summer the golden grain was rapidly ripening, but in working around the pit we couldn't help destroying a little of the crop. The day was an easy one for us after we had properly settled in, and a game of cards filled in the time nicely. That night as I was going to bed, there seemed to be something lacking, and I suddenly realized that the familiar buzzing of hungry mosquitoes was missing. What a pleasant change that was!! With no shells landing on our position, and no mosquitoes to bother us at night, we were quite prepared to stay there until the campaign was over.

Things livened up in the next few days as we fired in support of attacks launched by the Free French and our own Fifth Brigade, who were successful in capturing prisoners and equipment. Not a single enemy shell came anywhere near us, as our position in the valley was an ideal one from the point of concealment. Usually during the night we had to get out of bed, fire a mere ten rounds or so, and on getting the order to "Stand Easy," would resume our rudely interrupted sleep. During these short concentrations, the ear-splitting crack from a troop of captured German 88 mm. guns, firing directly over our heads, made us wince until we got accustomed to it. The echo of the roaring guns bounced from

valley to valley for miles around, finally fading away with a deep rumble in the distance. Later during our stay there, we were given the monotonous task of firing a shell every two minutes on to some crossroads four miles away, and each gun took its turn with a shift of two hours or more. In order to deceive the enemy, the regular timing was altered, sometimes two shells quickly following each other, and sometimes pausing for three minutes or more. It seemed a peculiar job to be doing, but it must have been all to a good purpose. On Friday, May 7th, we were told that Tunis and Bizerta had fallen to the First Army and thousands of prisoners were coming over to the British and American forces in the north, so it looked as though the end was in sight. However, the enemy still had to be dislodged from his strong fortress in the range of hills north of Enfidaville.

In the evening of the 8th, we packed up and moved through the village in our rear, to disperse in long lines on the plain beyond. In the gathering dusk hundreds of tiny lights sprang into being as billies were boiled over petrol fires, and they looked like street lamps stretching away into the distance. Darkness quickly fell, and there were many loud yells to put those so-and-so fires out, before they attracted the attention of the enemy. At 10

o'clock that night we set out on the journey which was to take us back to the coastal sector, as it appeared as though our mission in the Pont du Fahs area was completed. The night march towards the coast was a very uncomfortable one, without lights, and ploughing along through clouds of blinding choking dust. With no room inside the quod I was riding on the top, so got the full effect of the fine whitish powder which clung to my face and hair, and made me look like a ghost. At one o'clock in the morning we arrived at our destination on the wide expanse of plain, and without bothering to have a wash, I got into my blankets dust and all. During the remainder of the night our vehicles stayed in close formation, but as soon as the day dawned they were hurriedly dispersed, and then I had time to get a good wash and clean up.

CHAPTER X

FINAL VICTORY IN NORTH AFRICA

After a morning's rest on the plain well behind the lines, we packed up and then proceeded in column of route along the main road north. As we approached Enfidaville we could see that the town was being blasted by heavy German guns, and knew that we would have to run the gauntlet of the shelling. Just as we reached the outskirts, a salvo burst about three hundred yards in front of us, and out of that inferno of smoke and flame dashed an ammunition vehicle belonging to a Kiwi Artillery Regiment. The driver was hunched over the wheel with his foot hard down on the accelerator, and the man alongside him sat bolt upright, with a thin trickle of blood running down the side of his white face. With numerous holes through the truck, it was a miracle that both the men hadn't been killed. It was with some apprehension that we entered the town and tore through the deserted streets, but we all emerged without mishap. Speeding up the dusty road we had soon regained our former positions north of Enfidaville, and in no time at all had the guns in the pits and camouflaged.

In the next few days the battle raged fiercely all along our front, neither side giving

the other any respite, and we wondered if and when the enemy was going to crack. He threw over everything he could lay his hands on, and we were kept busy replying in like manner. One day we heard the vicious "grinding" of some Nebelwerfers, and with a terrifying noise the 150lb. projectiles screamed towards us. With one accord we each dived into the nearest available hole and waited for the ensuing explosion, but the missles passed right over our heads to burst with a shattering roar in the olive groves behind. The next minute two huge plumes of oily black smoke rose into the air as two vehicles caught fire and burned fiercely. The crackling of small arms ammunition reminded one of a 5th of November evening, but gradually the fires died down and nothing was left except charred and twisted wreckage. On one occasion, while visiting R.H.Q., our Troop Commander was blown flat by the blast of one of the huge shells, but miraculously he remained unhurt. Luckily something seemed to go wrong with those six-barrelled mortars, and one by one they went out of action, much to everyone's relief. The Nebelwerfers certainly caused some damage while in operation, and there were quite a few casualties in a battery of the Royal Artillery dug in behind us. A couple of Kiwi ack-ack gunners were also

wounded on their Bofors position, between Enfidaville and ourselves.

With unabated fury the battle went on, and as we poured thousands of shells into the enemy's positions, his guns made a feeble reply in comparison. A common practice of his was to fire numerous shrapnel shells into the air directly above our heads, but they were far too high to do any damage and we just used to laugh at his efforts. Apparently he was anxious to get rid of as much of his ammunition as possible, without worrying a great deal about its effect. Occasional shells did land on our position, and to shelter from the flying fragments which sometimes even clanged on the iron poles supporting our camouflage net, we spent many an hour in the gun-pit. Away to our right rear we could see the guns of the Sixth Field Regiment pounding away, and at times they were completely obscured by dense clouds of grey smoke, as the enemy vainly endeavoured to shell them out of position. They held fast to their ground, and remained there until the battle came to an end.

Our bombers kept up a ceaseless attack on the enemy's forward lines, and so good was the liaison between Army and Air Force, we knew almost to the minute when a particular raid was going to take place. On one occasion smoke shells were fired from some guns to

direct the bombers accurately to their target, and all they had to do was to drop their loads of destruction right into that white pall of smoke hanging over the enemy. Time after time the "inexorable eighteen" Bostons, Mitchells, or Baltimores went across, and the ineffective ack-ack fire they encountered didn't even force them to break up their close formation. It was the well-known "pattern bombing" of the Western Desert Air Force, and I know of no better way of dealing death to the enemy, than dropping a solid "carpet" of bombs right on top of him. One day, when half a dozen large twin-engined planes roared towards us at a terrific speed, we thought for a minute that the Germans had managed to resurrect some aircraft from somewhere, and became slightly alarmed. However, when they banked in a turn and headed out to sea, we saw their twin fuselages and realized that they were the much talked of Lightnings of the U.S.A.A.F. Enemy aircraft were non-existent, and the enemy forces were getting a taste of what punishment we had to take from them in Greece.

The end drew near and on the 12th, the battle began to subside, although the enemy still fired some of his guns and we were kept busy most of the day. During the afternoon he stopped altogether but we carried on firing

until the evening, and our aircraft still kept up their bombing and straffing attacks. The dull rumbling of huge explosions and large clouds of black smoke appearing above the distant hills denoted that the enemy was busy with demolition. Unconditional surrender was all that would be accepted, and when would the Axis forces agree to those terms? It was reported that their retreat was cut off into the Cape Bon peninsula, and the Royal Navy was waiting for them to try and emulate Dunkirk, so what chance had they!! Late that night a wireless message was intercepted, indicating that they had had enough and were willing to accept the British terms. The message read as follows:—

"To the British First Army and Tenth Corps, Eighth Army:—
As my proposals for a truce to give time for my representatives to carry out their orders has not been accepted, and, as your troops are still carrying on their attacks in the Sanouff area, and considering the fact that my reps. sent out at 2100 hrs. yesterday to the British First Army have not returned, I have ordered my men to lay down their weapons.

Signed:—Field Marshal
Giovanni Messe.
Italian G.O.C. in C."

On May 13th, Marshal Messe surrendered complete with staff to our Divisional Commander, Lieutenant-General Freyberg. Early that morning a few British guns were firing away over by the coast, but shortly they ceased fire, and all was quiet. After listening to the bark of guns and the general clamour of battle for weeks on end, the complete silence seemed uncanny. It was hard to realize that a bloody combat had been in progress a mere day or two before, but the happy laughing faces of the men indicated that they had been released from the nervous strain of action. Thousands of prisoners began to come in, stretching away in long lines as far as the eye could see, and with one accord we went across to have a look at the men we had beaten. With heads down, they trudged slowly along, stirring up the dust in the still air. They were weary men those, and with their dirty unshaven faces and bloodshot eyes, looked as though they hadn't had a decent wash or sleep for weeks. There were gunners, infantrymen, and engineers, and quite a few wore large shiny black feathers in their hats, denoting that they belonged to the famous Bersaglieri Regiment. Every now and then the long line of prisoners halted, when many of them sank wearily to the ground for a brief spell, before regaining their feet and continuing the long march towards the rear.

It was a gratifying sight, as we had chased some of those troops from Alamein in Egypt about two thousand miles away, and we knew that once and for all the fighting in North Africa was at an end.

With several of the boys I went up on to the crest in front of the guns, and surveyed the country that lay before us. The ground sloped gradually away, levelled out in a broad valley, and then rose steeply into the hills beyond. Plantations of olive trees dotted the countryside, the rich grain fields stretched into the distance, and here and there was the scattered thatched huts hurriedly evacuated by their owners. At the northern end of the valley a thick haze of smoke from burning dumps and vehicles obscured the view, but we could see the thin black lines of prisoners slowly wending their way towards us. It was rugged country, so it wasn't surprising that the enemy had held out so long, and it became apparent later that he could have withstood further attacks had he so wished.

As ammunition returns had gone by the board, my services on F3 were no longer required, so I shifted all my belongings back to George's truck. While I had been on No. 3 gun George had got rid of our little ack-ack weapon, as it was giving a lot of trouble, and he was kept far too busy with his own work

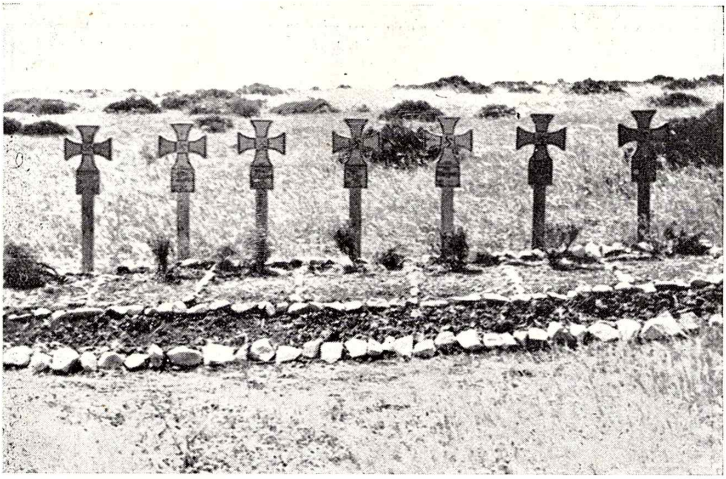
to operate it. It was of no further use, anyway. In the late afternoon we abandoned our gun position to move to the flat plain south of Takrouna, and there established ourselves for a few days. It was wonderful not having to worry about dispersing our vehicles, but, better still, the black-out was dispensed with, and there were no restrictions on lights. What a change it was, and at nights the whole area resembled a tiny city. The naked lights proved a disadvantage in one way, however, as they attracted swarms of mosquitoes, which tended to make our hours of rest rather uncomfortable. To keep the little brutes out of our tent, George and I put up a screen of cigarette smoke before going to sleep, and that, together with some netting at the doorway, proved quite effective.

At long last we were issued with summer clothing. Our battledress was much the worse for wear, and decidedly too heavy for the heat of the day, so the change-over was greatly appreciated. There was a lot of fun at the quartermaster's truck when the boys were getting their issue. Underclothing and shirts were all right, but when it came to trousers it was an altogether different matter. For a start we were issued with drill longs, and they weren't so bad, although some of the boys had to turn up about a foot in order to get a proper

fit around the waist, and others could have done with an extra few inches on the bottom. Then the shorts!! Well, in the majority of cases they were neither shorts nor longs, but were short-longs halfway between. Some of the boys looked positive "screams" in their new outfits, and many were the facetious remarks passed about their "fashion-cut" clothes. I managed to get quite a good fit in longs, but the shorts ("Bombay bloomers," as we called them) came down below my knees, and a couple of folds were necessary to make them the right length. However, it was certainly a lot cooler in the new clothing, and we weren't particular about looks.

One morning, on being told that any who wished could go out on a tour of inspection of the positions held by the enemy, many of us piled into M5 and George's truck, and away we went. With an officer in charge, the primary idea was to give us some conception of the former enemy dispositions, but most of us went out with the thought of "loot" at the back of our minds. We bumped over the dusty track towards Enfidaville, then turned into our old gun site north of the town and dropped over the rise in front to the valley below. As we jolted and lurched over the uneven ground, a continual lookout was kept for any deadly mines or booby traps, but for once there

seemed to be none about. On coming to some enemy dug-outs situated in a deep dry water-course, we dismounted to have a look over the area. In many instances the Germans had burrowed their trenches in the almost perpendicular banks, where they had been perfectly safe from any number of shells rained upon them. The level floor of the wadi was literally covered with old discarded clothes and smashed equipment, and there wasn't a thing of value left. In the hot morning sun the stench of rotting food was overpowering, and where there was any moisture at all millions of flies made the ground black. It was a relief to get away from that unpleasant spot as we penetrated deeper into the enemy's lines, to be greeted by a scene of utter desolation among the numerous wadis and small hills. Trucks and cars were just blackened skeletons of twisted metal, guns were damaged beyond repair, and the ground was littered with bits of rifles, pistols, and binoculars. Dumps of food and clothing were scattered everywhere, and numerous empty wine flasks indicated that their supply of liquid refreshment had been kept up. I came across a small pile of German coloured smoke flares, so, after trying one or two out, threw a large sackful on to our truck, and George and I were to have a lot of fun later on. George came across a British quod



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German Graves near Takrouna

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Homs

resplendent with large black crosses, which had somehow been missed by the Germans in their work of destruction, and there appeared to be nothing much wrong with it. In the afternoon he went back, and, after very little work, had it in running order, so that was one more sorely-needed vehicle for our unit. We could have easily spent all day there, but our officer in charge finally decided that enough time had been wasted in rummaging about amongst enemy dug-outs, so called us together for the return trip to the troop. The boys were scattered far and wide inspecting " new pastures " as they went along, so it was some time before they all got word that we were going back and turned up at the waiting trucks.

Eventually we were all accounted for, and set off on the return journey, but on a different track to the one used previously. Many of the beautiful olive trees were reduced to blasted stumps, and where shells had landed in the fields of barley splinters had cut wide swathes like an expertly-wielded scythe. We passed hundreds of our shell-holes, and here and there lay a German outstretched in the grotesque attitude of death, looking up with unseeing eyes at the blue sky above. Further on, burial parties were busily engaged in their unpleasant task, and they could have that job to themselves as far as I was concerned. Only on one

occasion, away back in the early stages of the fighting at Alamein, had I been called upon to bury one of those shattered human frames, but it is amazing to what men can become accustomed. Rapidly approaching the open plain, we swung into the very shadow of Takrouna, which towered above us, and it seemed almost incredible that our men had scaled those sheer, rocky slopes under intense fire. We could see the little white village nestling on the summit, and the shell-torn buildings reminded us of the bloody battle that had raged there on the peak. Near the foot of Takrouna we came across a line of Nazi graves, and, as usual, the Germans had made a beautiful job of burying their dead. Each head-stone consisted of a piece of wood surmounted by a Maltese Cross, in the centre of which was a swastika, and just below was the name of the soldier whose last resting place it was. If given time, the Germans always did put a lot of work into their comrades' graves, and their neat cemeteries were scattered all the way from Egypt to Tunisia.

Soon Takrouna was left far behind as we moved along the dusty, beaten track across the level plain, and before long we had arrived back in our own troop lines. So thorough had the wanton destruction been, we had very little to show for our expedition behind the enemy lines. That evening, as if to put the finishing

touches to a pleasant day, each man was issued with a couple of quart bottles of Canadian beer at about one and sixpence a bottle, and it really tasted like "the nectar of the gods." It was the first we had seen for many weeks, but it doesn't take a Kiwi long to re-acquire the taste!

The next morning we tidied ourselves up and polished our boots in preparation for a thanksgiving service to be conducted by Padre Buck. It was a very nice little service indeed, and, while some of our comrades hadn't been so fortunate, we who had come safely through the campaign certainly had something to be duly thankful for. Padre Buck was one of the finest, and will long be remembered by the men of the 4th Field Regiment, as he served with us in Greece and also later in the 1941 Libyan campaign. It was our loss when he was promoted to become the senior chaplain of the division. Immediately after the brief service we marched over to a prearranged parade ground, where shortly all the artillery units of the New Zealand Division were assembled. In a short talk, the Commander of the Divisional Artillery praised our past efforts in the fighting and also informed us of the projected journey by road to Egypt, where a long and well-earned rest awaited us. At the conclusion of that ceremonial parade a few decorations were presented, including the Military Cross

for our Troop Commander in connection with his work with the King's Dragoon Guards. It was a pleasure to see him step forward to have the medal pinned on his breast, and " F " Troop basked in a sort of reflected glory.

The parade over, we marched back to our respective areas, and, as far as our troop was concerned, we were given the rest of the day to ourselves. Seeing that we had plenty of spare time on our hands, George and I gave our truck a thorough clean out, and then re-packed it in readiness for the long journey east.

CHAPTER XI.

RETURN TO EGYPT.

May 16th dawned bright and clear, and before long the hot rays of the sun began to make themselves felt. For the long journey east, truck cooking was again brought into practice, as it simplified the business of preparing meals should vehicles lag behind or break down. As the fiery ball of the sun gradually rose into the blue sky, we mounted up and started off on our long trek towards Egypt. With an excellent bitumen road to travel on, the convoy made fast time, and towards mid-day we approached the town of Kairouan.* This holy place, dotted here and there with many mosques and tall minarets, is comparable to the Mecca of Arabia, and is the scene of pilgrimages made by many Mohammedans in North Africa. The town

*Founded by the conqueror Okbah in the year 671, this city has attained great importance in the eyes of Mohammedans. Kairouan is considered one of the four "Gates of Paradise," and "seven days' stay at Kairouan equal one at Mecca," thus entitling the devout pilgrim to be called a "haji." Tunis itself cannot boast as many religious edifices as this holy city, which possesses over eighty such mosques and convents. However, like many other "holy places," Kairouan is also corrupt, and there diseases and infirmities of all descriptions run rife. The city has few industries apart from the manufacture of fancy saddles, copper and brassware, and scent, and provisions are brought from the coastal area some sixty miles away. There is very little cultivation around Kairouan, and most of the ground around the town seems to be taken up by numerous cemeteries.

boasted some large buildings, and many of the inhabitants turned out to see us rumble through the streets. British military police were on hand to make sure we kept to the right road, and we swung down an avenue of green trees and were soon out of the town. The road changed to a metal one so like country highways in our homeland, and as we bowled merrily along huge clouds of dust rose behind our speeding vehicles and drifted lazily over the ground. On each side of the road were extensive fields of grain rustling in the breeze, and often we passed the ever-present olive plantations. With George as our mechanic, we had to travel in rear of the "F" Troop column, to make sure that none of its vehicles broke down and were left stranded. Two of the trucks did give trouble in the shape of petrol blockages, and after those defects were remedied we were left miles behind our unit.

On leaving the formed road, we struck across the open country, travelling along a dusty track made by the thousands of vehicles preceding us. Gradually the distance between the troop and ourselves lessened, but the darkness fell all too quickly, and we were left with the job of sorting out our unit from the many bivouacked alongside the track for the night. Most units had their headquarters marked by petrol cans with the respective unit numbers

cut out of the tin and lights inside to show them up, but nowhere could we find our own regimental designation. In the end we decided to bed down where we were and wait until daylight enabled us to ascertain the whereabouts of "F" Troop. We found the guns all right, but were greeted with the sight of three punctures waiting to be fixed. While George got on to that job, I cooked some breakfast, but in the meantime the troop moved on, and once again we were left in the lurch. All the repairs being completed, we got away to a flying start, but in the afternoon struck trouble again when one of our quods suffered a petrol blockage. Coughing and spluttering slowly along, the quod would stop altogether every now and then and demand a complete rest. We were getting nowhere fast, so George tried the experiment of pouring petrol into the carburettor in an attempt to race the engine and clear the pipes. The tractor seemed to object to that, and back-fired, setting the mugful of petrol on fire. George immediately threw it on the side of the road, where it blazed merrily for some time, much to the detriment of his drinking utensil. As though satisfied that it had caused enough trouble, the quod started up again, and away we went.

Later on, while the tractor was having another breather, some natives came along and

showed great interest in our equipment, one chap being particularly taken with the shoes I was wearing. After some haggling over the price, I agreed to sell them for £1, so he handed me two 100-franc Bank of France notes in payment. As far as I was concerned, that money had "a bad smell," so I told him Bank of Algiers notes, or the deal was off. He soon came across with what I wanted, and went away quite pleased with himself. So was I, having bought the shoes in Cairo six months previously for ten shillings!! Those natives had more money than they knew what to do with, and would have paid almost any price for arms and ammunition. We surmised that they would probably cause enough trouble with the French authorities as it was, so knew better than to equip them with any more lethal weapons. They must have picked up dozens of rifles, etc., off the battlefield, and I wouldn't be at all surprised if there is disorder in Tunisia in the years to come. It was always obvious that there was no love lost between the Arabs and the French people.

As on the trip north, we again missed seeing Gabes, and detoured through the hilly country to the west. Many were the former enemy defensive positions we passed through before reaching the open plain approaching Medenine, and some of them looked almost im-

pregnable. Metameur, the scene of heavy fighting on March 6th, soon appeared before us in the gathering dusk as we sped down the clay road and on to the main highway between Gabes and Medenine. It was pitch dark when we passed through the latter, and all we could see were the ghostly white buildings in that silent and deserted place. Despite the lateness of the hour, we went on, determined to catch up with the troop, and some twenty miles beyond Medenine we saw in the distance the flickering of some unit's fires as they prepared a meal. It wasn't long before we came up on them, and strange to relate, they were the fires of our own 26th Battery, drawn up in laager alongside the road. Our stomachs seemed to indicate that something was very necessary to keep them quiet, so while I prepared a meal George took a run around the troop to see that all the vehicles were in good running order. Meals over, the fires gradually died out, and stillness descended over our little encampment.

Early next morning we were on the road again, rattling along at a good speed, despite the pitted surface of the bitumen highway. Considering the amount of traffic taken by that road in the past few months, it was a wonder there was any surface left at all. Ben Gardane was reached before long, and it hadn't

altered one bit since the time we last passed through it in early March. The little white hovels, the filthy streets, and the dirty children playing by the roadside would never alter in a hundred years. Some twenty miles beyond Ben Gardane was the tiny border village of Pisida, and once past it we were again on the soil of Tripolitania. The villages of Sabratha and Zuara were also on our route, and, with their white buildings and waving trees, were quite picturesque. It seemed hard to realize that the tide of war had rolled over them, and the inhabitants carried on their peaceful existence as though there had never been anything to disturb it. They knew that the battle for North Africa was over, and the might of the British was of no further interest to them. Driving in the shade of tall, stately trees lining the roadside, we gradually neared the outskirts of Tripoli, but were suddenly detoured off that beautiful road and had to bump and jilt over a narrow, dusty track. The evening shadows were lengthening when George happened to look round and see that his blanket roll was missing. Back we went, travelling some miles in an endeavour to find it, but eventually had to give it up as a bad job and go on our way. At Suani Ben Adem, not so very far from where we had been camped in February, there was a refuelling

point, so, with both tanks full, we proceeded along the main highway towards Tripoli. In the pitch darkness it was extremely difficult to locate our unit amongst all those bivouacked off the road, and only after making extensive enquiries from various quarters were we able to find our regimental area. In the dark it was impossible to judge the surface of the ground, and before going a hundred yards away from the main road our truck jerked to a stop and the wheels began to sink in soft sand. A few drops of rain quickly made up our minds for us, and we pitched the tent then and there, deciding to wait until morning before doing anything further. We had travelled back through Tunisia in two and a-half days, whereas the previous journey northwards had taken six weeks, but, of course, we had nothing to delay us on the return trip.

Our troop, which we joined in the morning after extricating ourselves from the soft sand, was nicely situated under some gum and olive trees, and their leafy branches gave welcome shade from the hot sun. We were to stay in that area (eight miles from Tripoli) for the day, as maintenance had to be done on all vehicles to get them in tip-top running order for the next lap of the journey. In the afternoon leave was granted to any who wished to visit Tripoli, so I decided to go in and see what

there was to be seen. Once in the town I wished that I had stayed at the camp, as there was absolutely nothing to do, and the heat and glare from the white buildings was terrific. Accordingly, I hitch-hiked back as soon as possible, and just had a lazy time resting under the gum trees. That little bit of Tripolitania was so like our homeland that, on closing my eyes, I could almost imagine myself lying under some shady trees at home. Barking guns were no longer ready to dispel that illusion, and the cheery chirping of birds seemed to make it more real than ever. That night the Kiwi Concert Party put on a show just across the road from us, and, with a small ration of beer, it was quite a pleasant evening. It seemed as though the whole division was at the show, and we at the back had some difficulty in seeing at times, but enjoyed those items that we could get a glimpse of. The performance over, we retired to our respective areas, and before long the camp became quiet as we settled down for a good night's rest.

The trip through Tripolitania was quite interesting until we reached Misurata,* after

*Misurata is little more than an obscure hamlet, although it has been described as the headquarters of over forty villages. A stone house, a modern lighthouse on the shore, and two or three dirty irregular lanes, lined with mud hovels, make up the "town" of Misurata. However it serves as a central meeting place, and derives some importance from the fact that it is the market for the surrounding villages.

which the cultivated areas vanished and all that met our eyes was a vast expanse of barren, tussocky country. Before coming to Misurata, we passed through Tagiura and Homs†, both quite sizable places, and the latter was a pretty little town, with its white houses showing up through the green trees. Like every other Arab town or village, Homs possessed its little white mosque and also the adjacent minaret, from which the "muezzin" proclaimed the hour of prayer to all Mohammedans. The convoy moved slowly through the streets almost nose to tail, and many native children ran alongside with the inevitable cry of "baksheesh." Needless to say, there was no response from the Kiwis, who are not at all partial to "wog kids." On reaching Misurata, a large notice proclaimed to all and sundry that the village was out of bounds to all troops, and we bivouacked under some tall date-palms not far away. In no time at all the egg-selling

†Heiress to the ancient Leptis, whose magnificence and extent formerly earned for it the title of Magna, Homs was founded by refugees from Sidon. It was originally situated on a lofty headland bounded by a rivulet on the eastern side, but to the south a new city gradually developed, to become the present-day Homs. Many beautiful buildings were constructed there, but their very ruins have succumbed to the encroaching sands, and are buried under huge dunes. A triumphal arch was once erected there by Marcus Aurelius, but the majority of the buildings of which any traces remain were built during the reign of Septimius Severus, a native of Leptis Magna. A few columns still lie scattered about, but most of the recovered ruins have been removed to safe keeping in England or France.

natives had made their appearance, so George and I bought quite a few eggs to supplement our unvarying army rations. Any little delicacies like that were always a welcome change.

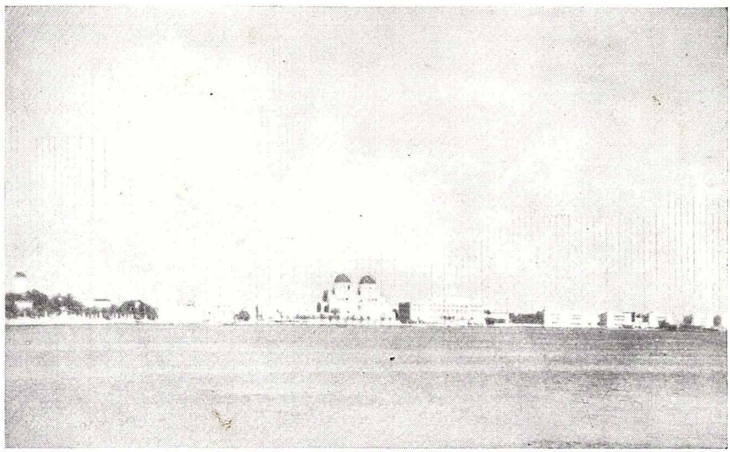
After a day's run down the barren coastline, a surprising sight met our eyes on rounding a bend in the road. With its white buildings and green trees standing out against the deep blue waters of the Mediterranean, Sirte looked a perfect jewel. All too soon we left that pleasant spot behind, and proceeded down the barren coastal strip with its monotonous scenery of miles and miles of scrub and sand. That night we camped right on the seashore not far from the village of Nofilia, and in the placid blue waters not a hundred yards away many of the boys got rid of the accumulated dust of travelling. As soon as it was properly dark, a white screen was tied to the side of a three-ton truck, and then the Mobile Cinema Unit put on a show for us. A sloping bank provided quite a good vantage point from which to see the picture, and it was a very pleasant way of passing away the evening before retiring to bed. During the trip to Egypt we were shown a number of films, and appreciated greatly the good job done by the Cinema Unit.

On the morning of May 23rd the strange sight of an immense archway over the black

ribbon of the road in the distance met our eyes. As we drew nearer to the edifice it assumed massive proportions, and when passing under it the top of the arch towered high above us. It was known as the Marble Arch, marking the boundary between Tripolitania and Cyrenaica, and as a showpiece of the Italian Colonial Empire I thought it was very inferior. Despite the fact that it was beautifully built, it looked so out of place there, standing alone in that barren expanse of featureless desert. The huge monument gradually receded into the distance as we sped along the highway, and the blistering sun beat on our backs and softened the tar-seal surface of the road. At El Agheila the former well-prepared enemy defences became apparent, with gun emplacements, numerous minefields and trenches, and miles of barbed wire. With the natural barrier of a salt marsh protecting the greater part of their front, it was no wonder the Axis forces thought their Agheila fortress impregnable. That was until December, 1942, when a "left hook" by the Kiwis, in conjunction with a frontal attack by other formations of the Eighth Army, made them realize their mistake. Our destination for that night was a spot a few miles beyond Marsa Brega, when we turned off into the desert, and, after cooking a meal, bedded down. Early the following

morning a defective water-pump on one of the troop vehicles necessitated us being left behind, but, that fixed, we started off to make up some lost ground. Moving northwards, we passed through the straggling native villages of Agedabia and then Chemines, finally catching up with our unit where it was camped alongside the road a few miles short of Benghazi. With a few trees to relieve the monotonous sands of the desert, Benghazi promised to be a change, so we hoped to get the opportunity of looking the town over before continuing our journey.

Our wish was granted the following day, when leave was given to visit Benghazi, and adequate transport was provided to convey us there. To begin with, we toured all over the place in the trucks, but that wasn't at all satisfactory, so, on returning to the vehicle park in the centre of the town, we dismounted to have a look around at our leisure. I went with Bill and Des, two signallers, and we didn't miss much in our long walk around the streets of Benghazi. It was quite a pretty place, with long avenues of palms, little grassy parks, and beautiful wide streets. Apart from the harbour, the town wasn't badly knocked about by bombing, although here and there buildings had been reduced to mere rubble by an odd stray bomb. The huge two-domed cathedral



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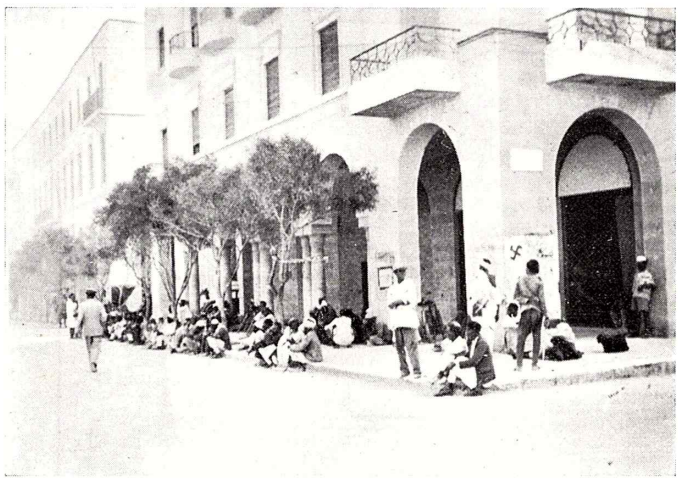
Benghazi from the Harbour
(Cathedral in the centre)



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Street Scene in Benghazi

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Luftwaffe Cemetery: Benghazi

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Approaching Tokra Pass

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Barce Pass

standing by the waterfront was hardly damaged at all, except for the marks caused by bomb splinters, and they couldn't very well be avoided. On the other hand, with sunken ships and destroyed jetties, the little harbour gave much evidence of constant bombing attacks. Benghazi had changed hands so often that it would be hard to say definitely whether the Luftwaffe or the R.A.F. did the most damage, but I would be inclined to put my money on the latter.

The reflection of the sun threw off a terrific glare from the dazzling white buildings, and our feet were sore and tired with walking on the scorching pavements, so it was with some relief that we returned to the shade of our truck. There being nothing to do in Benghazi except go sight-seeing, a large crowd of Kiwis had gathered in the vehicle park, and the ever-popular game of two-up was in progress. Money changed hands rapidly as the shining pennies spun in the air, and apparently any type of currency was legal tender in the "school." Tunisian, British Military Authority, and Egyptian notes were used, and some of the lucky punters had a little difficulty in assessing the value of the mixture held in their hands. Finally, we collected a truck-load of the boys who wanted to get away early and set off on the return journey to the camp. On the

way we passed a Luftwaffe cemetery, where dozens of wrecked aircraft were strewn all over the ground. There were Junkers 52's, 88's, and 87's (Stukas), Messerschmitts, and also some Italian Fiats, Bredas, and Capronis. What a hunting-ground for souvenirs it would have been, but it was probably guarded, and anyway we didn't get the opportunity to do any "ratting."

To fill in the time that evening, several of us decided to go down the road to a Liberator 'drome of the U.S.A.A.F. and have a look over their 'planes. Apparently anyone with a New Zealand shoulder title on his shirt had the freedom of the place, as we weren't stopped, and there didn't seem to be a very adequate guard on duty. The size of the huge four-engined Liberators amazed me, as it was the first time I had seen them at such close quarters, and they were in reality the battleships of the air. We were extremely lucky in "hitching" a ride both to and from the 'drome, as it was a distance of some miles, and a long walk didn't exactly appeal to us. I was so tired when we arrived back at the camp that I couldn't get into bed quickly enough, and as soon as my head dropped I was fast asleep.

From Benghazi we travelled northwards along the flat coast road, with the blue sea on our left and the level, sparsely-cultivated

country on our right. On passing through the small village of Tokra, where the main highway swung east, we rapidly approached a high range of hills confronting us. As first glance they looked impassable, but, on reaching the foot, the road could be seen winding its way up to the summit. Known as the Tokra Pass, the steep incline twisted and turned in hairpin bends, and it proved a hard grind for our vehicles. Finally the top was reached, and what a view was presented! In the beautiful clear air we could see for miles out across the blue waters of the sea, and tiny breakers were creaming on the narrow strip of sandy beach. However, there wasn't time to linger and admire the view, so once more we went on our way. Trees and shrubs grew in profusion by the roadside, and large fields of thick green grass and ripening grain covered the undulating country. This was more to our liking, and, indeed, resembled the landscape of our homeland. Large areas of that rich brown soil of Cyrenaica were under cultivation, and many were the little Italian settlements we passed as we moved rapidly along the road. Against a vivid green background, the dazzling whiteness of the concrete farm-houses was only relieved by the words "Ente Colonizzazione Libia" in raised black letters on the side of each building. Many of the Italian peasants,

who had worked so hard to make a success of their colonization, had preferred to stay and take their chances under British control, and they stood in small groups by the roadside to watch us go by. On coming to the top of a rise, we saw before us a broad valley in the centre of which nestled the little town of Barce, well laid out amongst green trees. Apart from a few Senussi natives and some British soldiers, the place seemed deserted, as we rolled on through the streets and beyond the town. Soon we were roaring up the steep Barce Pass so similar to that at Tokra, and once again we reached the summit without any breakdown. From there it was a gradual down-hill run, and the fertile countryside still remained green and fresh. A day later we were winding down a steep road which led to the town of Derna situated right on the sea-shore, and in that battered place, the usual British troops of occupation and a few Arabs were the only signs of life. Derna had suffered heavily at the hands of both Allied and enemy aircraft, and many of the buildings looked as though some giant hand had descended on them and squashed them flat. Looking back as we wound up the escarpment beyond the town, none of that destruction was apparent at a distance, and it looked very pretty, fringed with green trees on one side

and the blue sea on the other. Derna was no longer the objective of warring nations, and the inhabitants could rest assured that it had changed hands for the fifth and last time.

We travelled for some miles along the top of the escarpment, before dropping down to the arid desert below. Gone were the green fields, the waving corn, and the stately trees of that fertile part of the country, and once more our eyes rested on nothing but sand, sparsely dotted with stunted dull-green shrubs. That drab scene was to accompany us for the remainder of the journey into Egypt, and at times even the shrubs were to vanish. Tobruk was passed the next day, and what havoc war had caused there! The little port, battered by constant bombing and shelling, was almost unrecognizable, and many half-sunken ships lay at grotesque angles in the shallow waters of the tiny harbour. Here and there on the barren desert, were the little graveyards of those men who had fought so gallantly in 1941 to hold Tobruk against the might of the German Afrika Korps. When the port fell into enemy hands in 1942, it seemed as though they had laid down their lives in vain, but a memorable page was written in the History of the Second World War.

Within the next few days we skirted Bardia, passed Fort Capuzzo, and then drop-

ped down to Sollum Bay, and so we entered Egypt. From the top of the escarpment this little bay presented a wonderful picture, its placid blue waters seeming to relieve somewhat the monotonous vista of dusty desert. Sollum itself consisted only of a few battered buildings, and there was no sign of life in that deserted and war-torn spot. On we went over the dusty highway to Sidi Barrani, where the skeletons of shattered buildings served to distinguish the place from the otherwise featureless desert. One or two burnt-out Italian tanks gave grim evidence of the battles that had raged in that locality. By that time travelling was just a routine matter and becoming more tiresome every day, and as we penetrated further into Egypt, the temperature steadily rose. With not a cloud in the sky the blazing sun beat mercilessly down on us all day, and the smell of hot tar from the surface of the road was ever present. The desert outpost of Mersa Matruh was quickly left behind, then Daba, and so on to the large staging camp at Amirya some eighteen miles from Alexandria. As mute witness to the terrific struggle that had taken place in the Alamein Line, a large Nazi cemetery lay alongside the road near Daba, while further on, not far from the Alamein railway station itself, were the resting places of many Kiwis who fell in

the fighting. With such a waste of human life, one could not help but wonder why wars were waged. That evening at Amirya I went across to the Fifth Field Regiment to look up a comrade of mine, and together we went to the pictures at the local camp cinema. The "wog" door-keeper told us on arrival that there was no room inside, but we could see some vacant seats from where we were standing, so pushed past him and enjoyed a free show. That night as I went to bed, I thought, "Well, to-morrow will see the end of our long journey, and it will not be any too soon."

Being the senior regiment of the artillery, we were away early next morning on the last leg of the journey to our destination of Maadi Camp. It was a tiresome trip with the black ribbon of the road stretching away in a sea of yellow sand shimmering with heat, and we weren't sorry when the kilometre pegs denoted that Cairo wasn't far off. On turning a bend in the road the scene before us suddenly changed. Instead of the eternal sand, there lay in front of us the green Valley of the Nile, with the huge river running through the fertile fields. The great Pyramids of Giza towered far above us as we passed through Mena, but were soon left behind as we travelled along the broad highway towards Cairo. Our supply of smoke bombs which I had thrown on the

truck near Enfidaville was still adequate, so George and I proceeded to have some fun with them. Many a native got a fright that day, as a canister dropped at his feet and belched forth a huge cloud of blue, red, purple, or orange smoke. When crossing the Khedive Ismail bridge over the Nile, I threw one over the side and it dropped right alongside a native felucca. The crew of the boat certainly got a shock when the thing jumped out of the water several times with orange smoke pouring from it. From Cairo we went on, leaving a many-coloured haze behind us, and before long turned in to the New Zealand Base Camp at Maadi, and proceeded to our allotted areas. So ended our trek all the way from the heart of Tunisia to the capital of Egypt; over two thousand miles in fifteen days' travelling time.

CHAPTER XII

ARRIVAL AT MAADI CAMP

On our arrival at Maadi Camp after the long journey from Tunisia, we were allotted to huts and proceeded to make ourselves as comfortable as possible. That evening our Troop Commander told us that all married men, and a large percentage of single men from the First, Second, and Third Echelons were going home on leave to New Zealand. Great was the excitement, and there was much speculation as to who would be lucky and who wouldn't. Three bottles of beer came to light for each man, so a little celebrating was done in anticipation, as we were informed that the names of the lucky ones would be read out on parade the following morning. I'm afraid I didn't get to sleep very early that night, as I was quite excited over the possibility of being one of those fortunate persons to see their homeland again before long. It was with high hopes that I went on parade on the morning of June 2nd. After the roll-call, our Commanding Officer told us to gather round, and then proceeded to put our minds at rest. As he began with the married men, we single ones had to wait in patience until he came to our list, and although it was in alphabetical order (like everything else in the Army), we fol-

lowed the reading closely. At last I heard what I was sincerely hoping for; "No. 1638 Bombardier F. Martyn" and could have shouted for joy, but we were still on an informal parade and that simply "wasn't done." We were soon dismissed, and then did tongues wag!! There were many guesses as to when we would be leaving, but that fact was kept a carefully guarded secret right up until the last day. It wouldn't have done to let the enemy know the date of sailing, as our trip home would have been rather hazardous in consequence.

To recognize the Furlough Draft as an official group, it was given the name of "Ruapehu," so whenever that word was used, we knew to whom it referred. Dick, our driver in Tunisia, also "drew a marble," but Alan and George both missed out as they had arrived in the Middle East after the first three Echelons. It seemed hard that a lot of those men had seen as much fighting as we and yet were not eligible for the trip home, and in particular the few who went overseas with us in 1940 and still had to remain behind. From all accounts however, they could rest assured their turn would come later, and in the meantime, they were entitled to a fortnight's leave to which we of "Ruapehu" were not. To separate the Furlough Party from the rest of

our unit, we were moved into huts all on our own, and there were ready for any orders that might come through concerning us.

There was much activity by "Ruapehu" in the days that followed. A special quartermaster's store was opened for us, and the quartermaster himself really gave us of his best and went to a lot of trouble to make sure that we obtained the proper size in everything. Rather unusual for one of that calling in the Army! New battledress, shirts, and in fact, all new clothing to make certain that we would arrive in New Zealand well fitted out and looking the very best of well-dressed soldiers. The inside of the little store looked as though something had run amuck there, with hats, trousers, and tunics strewn all over the place. The staff was kept busy tidying up after each issue, and we probably weren't very popular. Every time a parade was called there, we had to stand in the blazing sun for an hour or two, but we could put up with that as it wasn't going to last much longer. One day they decided to poke another hole in all those who were going home, so we marched over to a medical unit's lines and were vaccinated. The effects of mine were nothing compared to those of three years before, but some of the boys were severely affected, and their arms became badly swollen. Nevertheless it wore off in

time and they once more returned to normal.

Apart from clothing parades, our time was much our own, so we frequently used to wander off into Cairo, with or without leave passes. The inhabitants of the city knew as well as we did that some Kiwis were going home on leave, and consequently the price of everything had risen for our special benefit. For example, wristlet watches costing three or four pounds a year previously had gone up to the exorbitant prices of six or seven pounds. It was the same with all goods, as the shopkeepers busily exploited the very soldiers who had saved their country, and they wouldn't have fared so well at the hands of the Germans. That was their way of showing gratitude!

Brightly lit at nights, Cairo looked like a peace-time city, and resembled those early days in 1940, before Italy made the blunder of entering the war. Every evening the place teemed with soldiers of various nationalities, all bent on enjoying their few hours of leave. One of the most popular pastimes seemed to be drinking, so the strain on the local breweries was terrific, and more than they could cope with. "Stella" beer, generally favoured by the Kiwis, always ran out far too quickly, as the demand greatly exceeded the supply. The liquor hours in the city were for two hours in the afternoon from half-past twelve, and again

in the evening from six until ten, so that eased the strain somewhat. One of our favourite haunts was the Parisiana Restaurant, near Shepheard's Hotel, and, being on good terms with "Johnnie," the barman, and occasionally tipping a couple of the waiters, we were always well looked after. As soon as six o'clock came our usual custom was to order several glasses of beer each and then settle down to enjoy them at our leisure, without having to hurry them down and order more before the supply ran out. Then sometimes we would drift over to the Kursaal, just across the road, imbibe our choice of spirits, which were there in plenty, and perhaps have a meal. It became quite a regular practice in those last days of ours in Egypt.

During the fighting in Tunisia, Dick, Alan, and I had promised ourselves a night out together when we reached civilisation again, so one day we went into Cairo with that object in view. We filled in the afternoon by seeing a picture at the best theatre in town (the Metro), and in the evening finished up at the Kursaal. With the ever attentive waiters dressed in their smart black suits, we had only to clap our hands to order what we wanted, and every time we did clap, our bill went up another notch. Towards ten o'clock we called it a night, and all piled into a taxi which took

us almost to the door of our hut. What a night, and what a head next morning!! Still, we had a lot of fun, and I think it was worth it. I spent quite a lot of time in Cairo those last few days, buying odds and ends to take home to New Zealand, but such prohibitive prices were asked that it wasn't worth getting a great deal. Into the Oreco (the Egyptian equivalent of Woolworths) I went to buy some elastic, which I heard was short in New Zealand, but when told that the price of the quarter-inch stuff was ten piastres (2s) a metre I thought better of it. Thousands of Kiwis were buying articles to take home with them, and the shopkeepers of Cairo were absolutely minting money.

One day in camp, after partaking of lunch as usual in the messrooms, many of the boys, including some members of "Ruapehu," contracted ptomaine poisoning, and were very ill indeed. I wasn't feeling hungry that day, so didn't go to lunch, and that saved me from the unpleasant business, apparently caused by some defective bully-beef. During the afternoon a big three-ton truck went all round the huts, stopping at the door of each, and someone poked his head inside and yelled, "Any more for the meat-wagon?" All the seriously ill were taken over to the camp hospital nearby, and some of them were wondering whether

they would recover in time to catch the boat home, but they needn't have worried, as by the next morning it was all over, and the effects were quickly wearing off.

At last the long-expected word came, and on the morning parade of June 14th our officer in charge informed us that we would be leaving that night for Suez, where a troopship awaited us. The huts became hives of activity as we packed all our gear into kit-bags after an inspection to see that we had no enemy equipment hidden away. The rest of the day was ours, and much time was spent in guessing as to what boat or boats we were travelling on and how long it would take to get to New Zealand. Someone "had it on good authority" that the Queen Mary awaited us, and many other ships were named, and opinions of the duration of the voyage varied from about sixteen days to a month. That night, about ten o'clock, we all trooped over to the messrooms, where a cup of tea and something to eat was ready for us, and, while there, several officers, including Padre Buck, came along to say good-bye. Shortly afterwards I went through "F" Troop's huts to say cheerio to all the boys I had known so long, and as George was away on leave at the time I just had to leave a message for him. It wasn't easy to part with them, as we had been

through so much together, and had got to know each other very well. They just wished me "bon voyage," and I said cheerio, and that was that. Young Alan, our wireless operator on R.F., was one in particular I didn't like leaving behind. He was a fine chap indeed, and we two had been together right through the Libyan campaign in 1941 and then for a lot of time in Tunisia, and had become quite attached. After our farewells were finished Alan carried my kit-bag over to the parade ground, where we lined up and awaited the next move. It wasn't long before our transport arrived, so we immediately mounted up and made ourselves as comfortable as possible for the journey to Suez.

It was midnight when we started off, and, after skirting Cairo, went through the suburb of Heliopolis and out on to the main desert highway towards the Suez Canal. The brilliant headlights of the vehicles cut a swathe through the inky blackness of the night as we roared along the road at a steady pace. As the first pale streaks of dawn crept into the sky, we could see ahead of us the little township of Suez, and beyond were the grey waters of Tewfik Harbour. The convoy turned right to follow the shoreline for a few miles and then dismounted to line up in the correct order for loading on to barges. While waiting there,

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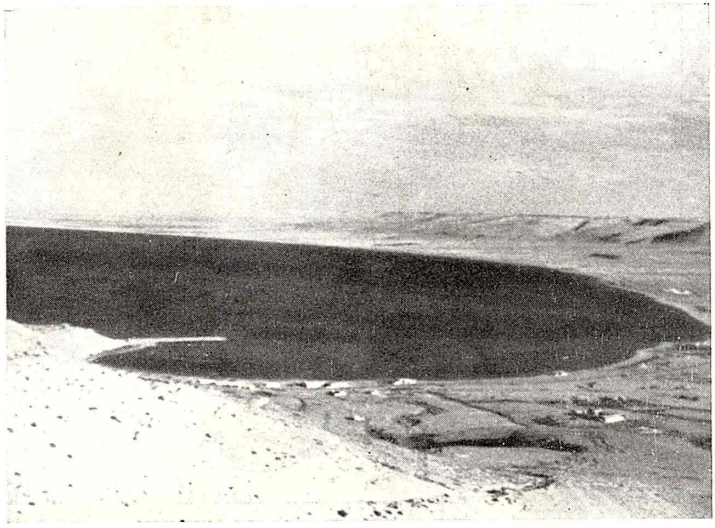
Sidi Barrani



See page 182

Sollum Bay

the New Zealand Y.M.C.A. put on a snack for us consisting of a pie, bananas, and a welcome cup of hot tea. I went back a second time for the latter. Shouldering our kit-bags, we marched along a jetty, where a provost officer examined our paybooks to make sure we had a right to be there, and then sat down to await the arrival of our barge. It turned out to be a small tug, which cast off as soon as it was packed full, and headed out into the centre of the harbour, where many big ships were anchored. About half a dozen of us were crowded into a small compartment in the forward part of the vessel, and we were provided with a tiny porthole, through which we could see the horizon moving up and down.

It was a choppy passage out, and the trip took over half an hour, but we eventually reached the massive liner which was to be our home for the next few weeks. She towered far above our tiny vessel, and, with her beautiful, clean-cut lines, she looked a real "greyhound of the seas," with plenty of speed at her command. On clambering up the gangway and entering the huge door in the side of the vessel, we were each handed a card which gave our individual berth number and location, and our quarters were a spacious pre-war lounge called the "Ritz Carlton." The bunks were in long rows four high, and I located mine,

which was second from the bottom. Shortly after our arrival there, our Troop Sergeant-major called for volunteers to help man the many guns on the ship, so, to give me something to do on the voyage home, I volunteered my services. It would help to pass the time, anyway. All those destined to serve on the guns had to change their quarters, so we moved down to the former third smokeroom, on the main deck aft. The place had been adapted for troops, and contained about seventy bunks in tiers of three, and, although a bit cramped when we were all off duty at the same time, it was fairly comfortable. I was in charge of the "Red" watch on our gun, while other bombardiers were in charge of the "White" and "Blue" watches respectively, and all guns were managed on the same principle. That evening we had our first meal aboard, and if it was a promise of more to come we were well satisfied. After tea I went on deck to recline there in the cool of the evening, and as I gazed across the unruffled waters of the harbour I wondered how long it would be before I was doing just that in New Zealand waters.

CHAPTER XIII.

VOYAGE BACK TO NEW ZEALAND

As June 15th drew to a close the anchor was weighed, and the propellers began to turn. Slowly we steamed out of Tewfik Harbour, and, once clear of the boom, we picked up speed and were soon doing a steady twenty knots down the Red Sea. The sun was setting, and as the great ball of fire slowly sank in the west it shed a reddish glow over the whole scene. The indescribable beauty of a sunset at sea, with its perfectly-blended colours ranging from a deep azure to a bright crimson, almost defies expression in mere words. Away on our right were high, barren peaks, their lower slopes running almost down to the water's edge, and once the sun dipped behind them darkness fell quickly. It was like an oven down below decks, so I brought my bedding up top, and, in the cool sea breeze, went to sleep alongside our gun. It was still too hot with any blankets on, so I just used them for a mattress, and lay down after removing most of my clothing.

Our watches on the gun kept us awake at all hours of the night, but it was very pleasant on the cool deck, and many a time I sat on the stern, just watching the water churning and tumbling from the propellers. The myriad

phosphorescent lights shining in the water rather fascinated me, and I could stay there for hours. Why the Red Sea was called by that name I could never fathom, as the deep blue waters obviously made it a misnomer, but perhaps it was derived from the reddish tinge imparted to the sea by the setting sun.

It took us well over two days to reach the port of Aden, where we anchored in the stream for a couple of hours. Small boats shot out from the shore as natives frantically propelled them along in an endeavour to be first at the ship's side. Soon the raucous cries of the black-skinned Cingalese filled the air as they attempted to sell their wares, but, as exorbitant prices were asked, business was more or less at a standstill. It was obvious that American troops had passed through there, as the natives were quite conversant with the dollars of the United States. On entering the small harbour, one glimpse of that arid British outpost was enough to curb any desire to see it at closer quarters. Without a breath of wind the heat was stifling, and we learnt later that the temperature in the sun on deck rose to 140 degrees. Partaking of a meal down below in the dining-room was a sticky business, and the wet bodies of the half-naked men glistened with perspiration. As one drank a cup of tea one could almost see it coming through the

skin immediately afterwards, and long queues were lined up at the ice-water taps throughout the ship. It was a pleasant relief when the blazing sun sank below the bare hills rising steeply behind the township, and the cool evening shadows lengthened. There was no blackout in Aden, and I was quite content to sit quietly on deck puffing away at a cigarette and watch the reflections of the shore lights dancing on the barely ruffled waters of the harbour. The next day we were again baked, as the sun beat mercilessly down from a coppery sky, but in the evening we slipped our moorings and moved out into the stream to anchor there for the night. What a change it was to get away from that sheltered spot and feel the cool southerly breeze sweeping in from the open sea.

Aden was soon left far behind as land dropped below the horizon, and for many days to come we were to see only the boundless ocean on all sides. Although uneventful, the journey across the Indian Ocean differed greatly from our previous one early in 1940. Then it had been a glassy calm nearly all the way, but on this trip the monsoons were blowing, and the sea became very rough. At times the gale howled through the rigging, and the sea was lashed into foam as the strong wind whipped the crests off the huge waves. Our

ship, big as she was, lurched and rolled through the heavy seas, and, on looking up, one could see the tall masts swinging slowly against a background of ominous black clouds. Frequent rain squalls could be seen in the distance as they rapidly approached us, and the decks were soon running with water from the tropical downpours. A few of the boys suffered the discomfort of seasickness at first, but, once accustomed to the slow motion of the boat, everybody settled down. I was one of those lucky ones unaffected by a rough sea, and could always eat my meals, without worrying whether they would make a return journey. At meal times during the rough weather the dining-room was noticeably emptier, and on occasions there would be hurried exits of those brave ones who thought they should attempt to get a meal down.

A short paragraph will serve to give the reader some impression of the place where we had our meals. The spacious dining-room had been stripped of many of its pre-war fittings, and a thousand men could be fed in one sitting at the rows of long tables, each accommodating about a dozen persons. The ship's officers in control did a very efficient job, the whole business of five sittings per meal taking only two and a-half hours to put through. The food was of the very best, and at two meals daily

each man was issued with his tiny individual loaf of bread. For the first half of the voyage it was brown wholemeal, and then changed to white for the remainder. With real butter and a selection of jams, it was extremely satisfying, and at lunch each day we either received an apple or orange each. The hot dinner each day was usually very good except for an over-abundance of custards, which weren't bad at all, but rather palled on one. The duration of the voyage came to be reckoned in terms of custards, so it was a great day when we were "only one custard from home." But I am getting a little ahead of myself.

Once across the Equator, the weather quickly grew cooler as we sailed further south, so we were forced to sleep below decks and not up in the open as usual. Rapidly the temperature dropped until it was in the vicinity of 40 degrees, so there was much activity as battle-dress was dug out of kit-bags and greatcoats made their appearance. It was noticeable that the upper decks became less frequented, but we on the gun-crews still had to do our watches, even in the bitterly cold nights. We had one advantage, which was supper about half-past nine every evening, when a good hot cup of tea and something to eat warmed us up. Nearly a fortnight after leaving Aden the Aus-

tralian coast hove into view, but it was two hours before we entered Fremantle Harbour under the expert guidance of a pilot and berthed at the wharves. The inevitable question immediately arose: "Would we get leave, and how soon?"

Each man below the rank of sergeant was paid a meagre ten shillings, but, as it turned out, money wasn't necessary to enjoy a night's leave ashore. In company with "Slim" and Jimmy, both of "F" Troop, I got off the boat about half-past five, and it was a great feeling to set foot on terra firma again after so many days upon the heaving ocean. Perth, that city of unsurpassed hospitality, was our immediate objective, so we quickly made our way to the nearest bus-stop. A little over half an hour later we were in the city, but cursed our luck in arriving there shortly after the "pubs" had closed. It had been a different story en route to Egypt in 1940, when official closing time was nine o'clock, and unofficially they were kept open for us all night. A drink being out of the question, the next best thing was a meal, so we partook of roast lamb and green peas in a little underground restaurant. It was still only seven o'clock when we finished there, so to pass the time away we had a game of snooker in a nearby billiard saloon. "Slim" proved too good for us, but Jimmy and I had

a lot of fun knocking the balls about. Later on it was decided that we " trip the light fantastic," so went along to a dance-hall in the centre of the city and there enjoyed ourselves thoroughly. Although it didn't seem much fun for Jimmy, who didn't dance, he seemed quite satisfied to just sit and watch. After the artificial glamour of Egypt, it was a treat to see the naturally pretty Australian girls, and the fact that they spoke our own language was an added delight. The " bints " of Cairo were all powder and paint, but these girls, with their fresh, healthy complexions, were as natural as could be. It was with some regret that we saw the dance drawing to a close, and, while " Slim " saw his choice home, Jimmy and I went down to the station to catch the train for Fremantle. The carriages were constructed on continental lines, with small compartments each accommodating eight or ten persons, and with so many Kiwis on their way back to the boat there was hardly enough room for civilian passengers. We rattled along through the night, and it was nearly one o'clock in the morning before we finally reached Fremantle. Jimmy and I lost no time in reaching our quarters, and, tired out, I rolled into my bunk to fall asleep immediately.

Next morning leave was again granted, so I went ashore with Dick, our former driver,

and Rex, who had been in "F" Troop some time before. We pooled our financial resources, to finish up with a little over ten shillings each, so that would be ample to give us a good day's leave in Perth. We walked up to the main road leading to the city, and before long a wheezy, gas-driven truck pulled up, whereupon the driver yelled out to us to climb aboard. About halfway into Perth we pulled into an hotel by the roadside, and the driver insisted on paying for our drinks. He simply wouldn't take no for an answer. One lot of frothing schooners down, we tried to reciprocate, but he wouldn't hear of it, so we each gave him a few cigarettes, which he greatly appreciated. Such was Australian hospitality wherever one went. He dropped us right in the centre of Perth by half-past ten, so, after a few beers, we had an excellent fish meal for lunch. Rex then left us, so Dick and I went along to the pictures, and when the show was over we walked the dark streets in search of a place where we could get another meal. Eventually we came to the club-rooms of the Young Australians League, and there a beautiful two-course dinner was put on for all Kiwis free of charge. It was just another of the many kindnesses shown to us by the generous people of Western Australia, who simply couldn't do enough to make our stay

one to be remembered. I doubt if any Kiwi will ever forget his leave spent there. About eight o'clock that evening Dick and I went to the Toppers Club, where a dance was put on especially for the N.Z.'ers, and a good time was had by all. The previous night Dick and Rex had been to one of their regular Thursday night dances, and, having enjoyed themselves immensely, they recommended the place to me, so when Rex joined us later we had a good night together. A Maori boy with a fine voice sang a couple of songs during the proceedings, and proved very popular indeed, while a Kiwi staff-sergeant provided dance music on the piano for the greater part of the evening. It was a very friendly little gathering, and we were sorry when it came to an end. We left the club about midnight, and, in making a rush for the last bus, which was packed to overflowing, I lost track of my two friends in the milling crowd. They told me next morning that they had stood on the luggage carrier at the back of the bus all the way to Fremantle, and had a far more comfortable ride than many of the passengers inside. With the last bus gone, I was in a quandary, and, on asking some Aussies how to get to Fremantle, they advised me to catch a suburban bus, which would at least take me some distance in the right direction. The bus went

as far as Cottesloe, some five miles from my destination, and, as a long walk didn't appeal to me, I decided to wait there for the train which came through some time after two o'clock. Several other Kiwis had also tried the same way of getting back to Fremantle, so together we waited on the station. The train was a little late, and absolutely packed with New Zealanders, so we rode in the guard's van at the back until reaching Fremantle just before three o'clock. I lost no time in making my way aboard ship, but, on arriving at our quarters, I was met with the sounds of revelry coming from within. It appears that a crowd of gunners had obtained a ten-gallon keg of beer from somewhere, and were holding a party, so the din created was terrific. Sleep was impossible under those conditions, so it was with relief I went on deck in the early light of dawn to get a breath of fresh air. Our smoke-room smelt very like a brewery!

As the hawsers were cast off our big ship drew away from the wharf, and, with a little tug fussily pulling at her stern, she turned slowly round in the narrow harbour. Then we steamed out into the stream, and a short while later the pilot's launch came out to pick him up on the completion of his job. On the little craft, which bounced across the choppy water, were two Kiwis who had just managed to jump

aboard as it was leaving the wharf steps, and they clambered up the rope ladder hanging from the side of our vessel. Nothing was said to them about being late, but we wondered what would happen to those few who had missed altogether and were still in the vicinity of Perth. Would they be sent back to the Middle East, or would they come on home later? Once the pilot was dropped, we headed out into the open sea, where a heavy swell was running, and our ship began to dip into it. The "Red" watch wasn't due to go on duty until the evening, so I lay down on my bunk to make up for some lost sleep. On our gun we split the watch up into three equal parts, and that meant that only one man had to be on at a time, although the others of that particular watch had to be on hand for any emergency. It was much better that way, as an hour or more in the biting wind and perhaps driving rain was enough for anyone. As we made our way slowly across the great Australian Bight, the weather grew colder every day, but, although the sea was quite choppy, it wasn't nearly as rough as I expected at that time of the year. The Bight is renowned as being a very rough stretch of water, but we had no cause to complain.

Before reaching Fremantle, ours had been a "dry" ship, but at that port large quantities

of beer from the Swan Breweries were shipped aboard and later sold at the canteen at certain hours. Every evening the beer queue extended down three flights of stairs, from the upper promenade deck to the main deck, as the boys lined up in anticipation with their mugs. In becoming a " wet " ship, the monotony of the long voyage was somewhat relieved, and on the whole the behaviour was very good. It was so good that it gave rise to words of praise from Brigadier Kippenberger, the officer commanding troops, in the little newspaper " Ruapehu Times," printed on board. Most issues of this paper had to be handed round to enable everybody to read the news, but the final edition of July 10th was published in sufficient numbers to give every man a copy.

In the grey dawn one morning, as we slowly approached the Tasmanian coast, there was quite a scare on board when a submarine was reported in the vicinity, and guns were quickly manned. I thought of the cold swim in store if we did get torpedoed. Our ship immediately picked up speed and zig-zagged all over the place, while our escort vessel darted about away ahead of us, dropping depth charges. The detonations of the charges struck the hull of our boat with a noise like someone hitting it with a heavy hammer, and many of the men still in their bunks at that early hour wondered

what was up. There still seems some doubt as to whether it was actually a submarine or not, as no definite information could be obtained on the subject. Before long the all-clear was given, and we proceeded up the Sounds towards Hobart. The air was beautifully clear, and we could plainly see the wooded slopes of the hills running down to the water, while in the distance the snow-covered peak of Mount Wellington could be seen shining in the early-morning sun. It wasn't until about ten o'clock that we finally berthed, and the wharves and warehouses were still white with a thick layer of frost. The red-roofed buildings of Hobart looked very picturesque against their vivid green background, and towering above was the dazzling white summit of Mount Wellington. Leave was granted only to those who had relations in the port, and even they were only given two or three hours ashore.

During the afternoon we once more got under way and started off on the last leg of the long journey to New Zealand. Slowly we steamed down the Sounds and out into the open sea again, and before long the rugged Tasmanian coastline faded into the distance and dropped below the horizon. The following day we were paid, and, in an attempt to put a stop to the gambling which was going on, so that each man would arrive in New Zealand

with something in his pocket, they gave every man below a warrant officer a £5 note and made it illegal tender aboard the boat. Warrant officers and above received £10. It was like trying to stop an avalanche, and the various games just went on as usual. We were also issued with tea, sugar, and clothing coupons, and also a combined leave-railway pass for our three months' furlough, so the prospects of a well-spent leave looked bright. Gradually we were getting closer to our homeland, and excitement grew as the time of our arrival drew nearer. On the night of July 11th it was ascertained that we would reach Wellington early the next morning, and disembarkation orders were posted on all noticeboards throughout the ship. I found out that my train left for Auckland on the night of the twelfth, so it looked as though I would have a day in the Capital before going north.

At the break of dawn I was on deck, and there we were, standing just off the Wellington Heads, scarcely discernible through the misty rain. I quickly obtained a vantage point near the stern, and, despite the cold, wet rain, remained there as we slowly steamed up the harbour. A lump came into my throat as I once more gazed on that familiar scene of Wellington city, with the hills dotted with houses rising steeply behind it. It had been three and

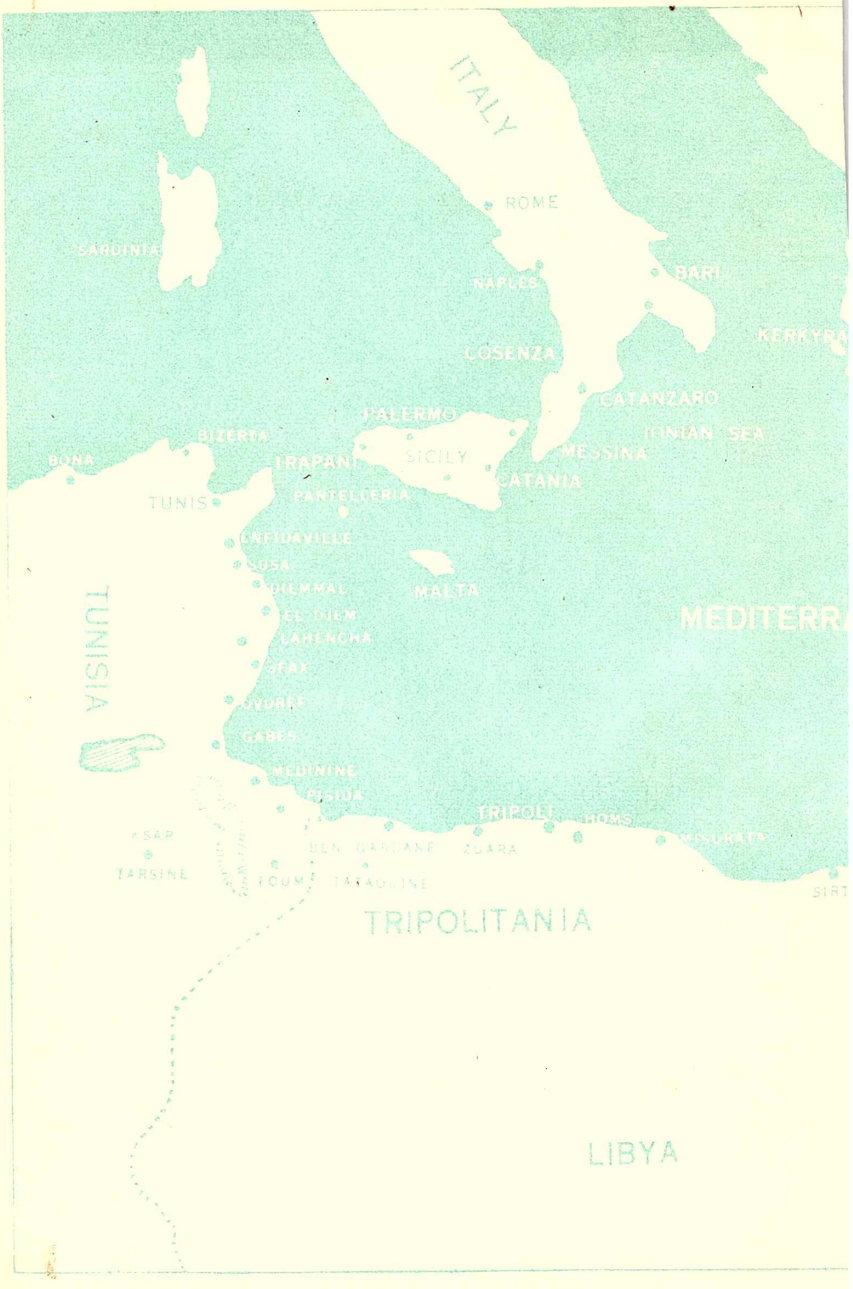
a-half long years since I last saw what now lay before my eyes, and I could only thank God for bringing me safely through the many dangers in distant lands and back to my beloved country. As we drew near to the wharves. a small crowd began to collect, and motor horns and train whistles blared forth to announce our arrival. The crowd quickly grew outside the gates, but nobody could get on to the wharf itself, and many were the sarcastic comments hurled at the policemen as they stood stolidly on guard. However, one of them opened one of the big gates to let somebody out, and that proved his undoing, as he was just pushed out of the way, and the excited crowd surged on to the wharf. Many were the names called to and from the high decks of the transport as people endeavoured to locate each other, and numerous messages were thrown backwards and forwards in tobacco tins or wrapped around coins. Obliging sailors helped in delivering messages for those anxious to get news ashore, and also got many copies of the morning paper for us.

After representatives of the Government had come aboard to extend an official welcome, the first men began to disembark, and, as they were Wellingtonians, it wasn't long before they were being welcomed back to their own homes with open arms. To remain cooped up on the

ship all day was somewhat galling, so many of the boys slid down ropes or went through portholes to the wharf below. There was no official leave granted, but they couldn't very well expect us to remain on board to cool our heels when the city, a mere stone's throw away, beckoned us. I was just walking along a passageway when one of the ship's crew, with a sly smile on his face, opened one of the big watertight doors in the side of the vessel, so we poured out on to the wharf three abreast. In no time at all I was outside the gates, passed through the crowd assembled there, and went on into Wellington city. On all sides broad smiles greeted me as I walked along, and I was stopped many a time by people who just wished to tell me how glad they were to see the boys home again.

I had returned to that country that has no parallel anywhere else in the world, but, above all, I was HOME.

THE END.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TRIPOLI AND BEYOND

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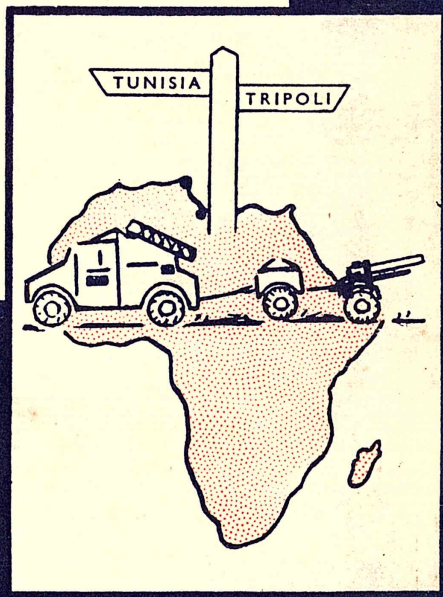

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TRIPOLI AND BEYOND

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I had nothing whatsoever to do with the writing of this book of Furneaux Martyn's, but so closely upon the heels of my *Kiwi Saga* does it follow, in so similar a style is it written, and so ably does it finish what I started, that I felt I had to join with him and our publisher in submitting that our two books jointly cover the epic story of the New Zealanders in the desert campaigns.

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TRIPOLI AND BEYOND

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